



STUART PALMER



A
HILDEGARDE
WITHERS
MYSTERY

Hildegarde
Withers
Makes *the* Scene



A MYSTERIOUSPRESS.COM BOOK



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INTEGRATED MEDIA

NEW YORK

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1.

IN THE OFFICE AT CENTRE Street Headquarters where Inspector Oscar Piper kept his desk and hung his hat, the phone began to ring. The inspector, suffocating in a welter of the administrative chores that he still considered an unreasonable imposition, came up for air and grabbed the noisy instrument with the reprieved feeling that it was at least something different to do. His bark was answered by the suave voice of the commissioner himself.

“Oscar? How’s everything in Homicide?”

The inspector, taking this question as rhetorical, raked the fingers of his free hand through grizzled hair and responded cautiously, with a touch of Black Irish humor, that things in Homicide were pretty dead. He was rewarded with a polite chuckle at the other end of the wire.

“I’m sending someone over to see you, Oscar,” the commissioner said. “He’s on his way.”

“What does he want?”

“I’ll let him tell you that. Frankly, more than anything else, I think he needs to have his hand held.”

“Wrong sex. I’m only holding hands with females this week.”

“Seriously, Oscar, I wish you’d do whatever you can for him. As a favor to me, if you need a reason. His name’s Bernard Gregory. Corporation lawyer. Substantial citizen. To tell the truth, I know him quite well, although I wouldn’t exactly call him a personal friend.”

“Why hand him to me?”

“Because it occurred to me while I was talking with him that you might be the one person in a peculiar position to do him some good. You’ll understand, I think, when you listen to his problem.”

“My peculiar position is running Homicide. Is homicide his problem?”

“Nothing like it. Consider this a diversion, Oscar. Something for a change. Look out for him, will you, Oscar? There’s a good fellow. I’ve got to run now.”

The commissioner hung up and, presumably, ran. Inspector Oscar Piper, immobilized by a plethora of paperwork, remained anchored at his desk. Again he raked his grizzled head, cursing soft Irish curses. For no

specific reason, directed at no selected thing or person. It was just that he had been inclined by experience as well as nature to an uneasy and profane reaction when commissioners came bearing gifts or asking favors.

It was about half an hour later when Bernard Gregory was ushered through the door by the uniformed watchdog on the other side. Inspector Piper, mindful of the commissioner's artfully implied request for kid-glove treatment, got his short, wiry body to its feet and offered a greeting with a bony hand. He resumed his seat behind his desk after Gregory had, on invitation, occupied one in front of it. Inspector Piper, without appearing to do so, inspected his visitor with a sharp eye. The commissioner had said that Bernard Gregory was a substantial citizen, and he looked it. Broad shoulders, thick bole, sturdy legs with some spring left in them. Gray hair, sharply parted and smoothly brushed. Clipped gray mustache between a bold nose and thin lips. Wide forehead and direct eyes, now slightly clouded by whatever problem had brought him where he was. He was groomed and polished and tailored, but he wasn't soft. Why is it, the little Irish inspector wondered, that all corporation lawyers look like variations of an old Calvert ad and all criminal lawyers look somehow disheveled and slightly soiled, as if they were wearing dirty underwear. Well, that wasn't true, of course. It was a libel on the latter, at any rate, a tenacious image invulnerable to all contrary examples, probably established by Clarence Darrow and carried on by John J. Malone.

"I suppose," said Bernard Gregory, "that the commissioner has warned you of my coming."

"He has informed me," Inspector Piper amended. "What can I do for you?"

Bernard Gregory leaned forward, clutching his knees as if to underscore by his position the bluntness of his words. "I'll come directly to the point, Inspector. My daughter is missing. I want her found."

Inspector Piper wondered with a touch of weary asperity, which he dissembled, how many other distraught parents in this city, to say nothing of all the other cities of all the world, could say the same thing. But he must not, he reminded himself, let his childless bachelorhood make him impatient with the problems of those less fortunate.

"We have a Bureau of Missing Persons," he said. "This is Homicide. Why have you come to me?"

"I didn't come. I was sent."

“Of course. By the commissioner. It’s just that the Bureau of Missing Persons is organized and equipped for this kind of work.”

“I’ve been to Missing Persons, as a matter of fact. I got the feeling that my problem wasn’t taken very seriously. I wasn’t satisfied. That’s why I exploited my acquaintance with the commissioner and went to see him.”

“I see. Well, you shouldn’t make any hasty judgment about Missing Persons. Believe me, it wasn’t that they didn’t take your problem seriously. It’s merely that they can’t get emotional about a problem that constantly repeats itself. You can’t expect them to. It happens every day, Mr. Gregory. People disappear. Nowadays, because of the uncertainty and unrest of the world, an alarming percentage of those who disappear are, like your daughter, very young. I assume, at least, that your daughter is very young.”

“She’s twenty-one. Just barely. I can no longer exercise authority over her if she chooses to disregard it. That’s not the point. The point is, I’m worried about her. I don’t know where she is, and I want to know. If she’s in trouble, I want to help her. Besides, there is another and very pressing reason why she must be found. Her mother is on the verge of a nervous breakdown.”

There it was, Inspector Piper reflected with genuine compassion. There was the inevitable effect of every thoughtless, rash, aberrant act. Someone else, usually innocent, was always hurt, destroyed or otherwise affected by it. No man is an island. Especially is a parent not an island. Why couldn’t the loved children of loving parents understand that? Why were they deliberately most cruel to the ones most vulnerable? Why? Because the best of them, when you stopped to consider it, were creatures of fierce conviction and total commitment. Because they became involved in something that was more intensely important than any other thing or any person. Does Mother suffer? Well, that’s too bad, but it can’t be helped. *Woman, what have I to do with you?*

“How long,” said Inspector Piper, “has your daughter been missing?”

“About two weeks. Possibly a little longer. I can’t be exact because I’ve been unable to discover just when she was last seen, or by whom.”

Inspector Piper’s bushy eyebrows had climbed a fraction of an inch up his forehead. “That long ago? Have you done anything before this to try to locate her?”

“Certainly. When she didn’t report back to school on time, I drove up immediately to see if I could get any lead as to where she might be. First,

however, I made inquiries at the office of the Committee of Artists for Peace here in New York.”

Inspector Piper lifted a hand in a truncated halt sign. He shook his grizzled head as if to clear it. “Wait a minute. You’re losing me. Maybe you’d better back up and fill me in.”

“Of course. Sorry. My daughter Lenore is, or was, a senior at Bennington. As you may know, they have what they call a non-resident term there. It begins about the middle of December and ends about the middle of March. In this term the girls are turned loose to rub elbows with the rest of us. They’re required to work at something or other, of course. It’s supposed to give them experience with reality, a taste of the world as it is. I don’t know. Maybe it’s a good thing. They seem to live, otherwise, a rather cloistered life up there. Not that they aren’t allowed extraordinary liberties. Apparently the girls impose a rather severe discipline upon themselves.

“Anyhow, they have this non-resident term, and Lenore chose to work this year for the Committee of Artists for Peace. Her mother and I saw her infrequently during the term. She didn’t live at home, and she seemed to want to be left alone. She completed the term, all right. I discovered that much at the office of the Committee. But she didn’t return to school afterward. Wherever she has gone, she apparently went directly from New York.”

“And no one at the office of the Committee could give you a clue?”

“If they could, they wouldn’t. They assumed there that she had returned to school.”

“Who did you talk with there?”

“The director. Several people in and out of the office. Particularly with a young man named Bud Hoffman. I was told that he and Lenore had been seeing a great deal of each other after hours, and that he might be expected to know more about her personal affairs than her other associates. But apparently he didn’t.”

“He couldn’t help you?”

“No. As a matter of fact, he gave me the impression of being rather stunned and embittered by Lenore’s action. He seemed to look on it as a personal injury, or something of the sort. He hadn’t been with the Committee as long as Lenore. He was taken on afterward, and was leaving immediately. To be exact, he had already left it. I got his address at the Committee office and found him in his rented room nearby.”

“He had no idea at all where your daughter might have gone?”

“He said not. He said she just vanished without a word of explanation or good-bye or anything else. I felt sorry for him. He seemed like a substantial sort of young man. Older than Lenore. About thirty, I’d say. Stocky. Blond. Considerably neater and more clipped than most of the others I talked with. Somehow he didn’t strike me as the sort who would be working for a Committee of that nature. He was obviously hurt and angry. Lenore is an attractive girl, and she has always treated her young men rather badly. I suppose it’s simply because she has never been able to take any of them seriously.”

“And no one at your daughter’s school could throw any light on her disappearance?”

“None. I talked at length with her counselor and her roommate, without results. It was strange. I had the uncomfortable feeling that they considered me a meddlesome old fuddy-duddy who had his wind up for nothing.”

“That was, as you say, about two weeks ago. What action, if any, have you taken since then?”

“I hired private detectives to try to trace her. Lenore’s mother and I discussed it, and we decided that that would be best. At least in the beginning. We wanted to be discreet, you see. To avoid publicity if we could. Not that I would have been withered by a little publicity, however unpleasant, but we had Lenore to consider. She’s a very intense and sensitive girl. If she’s gone off on some kind of mission or crusade or something, something she feels is vital, God knows what it would do to her pride to be publicized and possibly ridiculed. Most important, God knows what it would do to her relationship with us. With her mother and me.”

“The police, Mr. Gregory,” said Inspector Piper drily, if not caustically, “are also capable of discretion. Never mind that, though. I take it that your private detectives were unsuccessful, or you wouldn’t be here.”

“That’s true. The agency was recommended to me highly, but it’s little enough that they’ve turned up. Indeed, the one bit of pertinent information I’ve acquired came to me quite independently through the United States mail.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“A bill from a major oil company. Lenore apparently needed repairs done on her car that she was able to have done at a service station. The bill

came to slightly less than a hundred dollars. The repairs were done at a station in Gallup, New Mexico. I don't quite understand why Lenore used her credit card, for I have reason to know that she left New York with plenty of money. Perhaps she wanted to hang onto her cash for another purpose. However that may be, I'm glad she used the card. The address on it is our address in Manhattan. Her bill, therefore, came here, and I, of course, opened it."

Inspector Oscar Piper was silent. The Black Irish blood in his moderately sclerotic veins was beginning to seethe, and an unholy suspicion was slowly achieving the stature of a certainty in his brain. A whole new prospect had been opened unto him by the simple intelligence that Lenore Gregory had been located, however briefly and indirectly, in Gallup, New Mexico. Surely no one went to Gallup, New Mexico, except people who lived there, unless they went there on their way to somewhere else. And Gallup, New Mexico, as all informed folk knew, was on the way to Los Angeles, California. The intelligence also opened a crack through which Inspector Oscar Piper was privileged to peek once more into the malodorous, devious mind of a police commissioner. At last he was beginning to understand why Bernard Gregory, who had a missing daughter, had been steered by a conniving buck-passer to the domain of Homicide, which should ordinarily have no concern in the matter. Now he understood what the commissioner had meant by saying that he, Oscar Piper, was in a peculiar position. It was not, in fact, that he was in a peculiar position. It was that he had a peculiar friend. A peculiar friend in a strategic place. Inspector Piper breathed deeply and tried to speak calmly.

"You say she had plenty of money," he said. "How much is plenty?"

"Something over a thousand dollars, I'm afraid."

The inspector's eyebrows climbed again. "That seems like a very large sum, especially for a girl off on her own somewhere. Was it in cash?"

"I assume so. Unless she bought traveler's checks."

"How did she get hold of that much cash? Was she well paid by the Committee she was working for?"

"She wasn't paid at all. She was donating her time and work. I made her an allowance for expenses. When her nonresident term was near an end, in anticipation of her return to campus, I deposited a thousand dollars in her personal checking account. I had no hesitation about it, because Lenore has always been sagacious in her expenditures. However, when she didn't show

up at her school, I checked with the bank and found that her account had been cleaned out, except for a nominal amount to cover outstanding checks.”

“When did she withdraw the money?”

“March fifteenth. The final day of her term.”

“She must have left soon after. Probably the same day or the next. You say she had her car repaired at a station in Gallup, New Mexico. What kind of car was she driving?”

“A Volkswagen. About a year old. Anyone who saw it should easily remember it.”

“Oh? I was under the impression that Volkswagens make a virtue of looking like each other.”

“Not this one. Lenore had one of the girls at school, an art student, give it a paint job of daffodils.”

The inspector closed his eyes briefly, imploring the succor of Judas Priest with all the nagging despair that many an oldster feels when he stares in dismay across the generation gap. One of those! He might have known it. A blooming flower child. A tender dispenser of sweetness and light. A prolific mutant of the standard cuckoo, multiplying like rabbits to harass parents, confuse sociologists, and complicate the lives of honest cops. In Washington, D.C., and probably in other cities across the country, there was an organization called the National Society for Parents of Flower Children. Patterned somewhat after Alcoholics Anonymous, it provided a therapeutic symposium where desperate parents of incomprehensible children could share their miseries and cry for strength. In the inspector’s opinion, it was appropriate that the NSPFC had taken AA as a pattern, inasmuch as the former was likely to be the precursor of the latter.

He was certain now, in view of the Gallup clue and the decorated Volkswagen, that Lenore Gregory had fled to the City of Angels or its environs, seeking the company of soul brothers and sisters along the Sunset Strip or at Laguna Beach or wherever the brothers and sisters were gathered for spiritual and sometimes carnal communion. Why, he wondered bitterly, couldn’t she have been content with the selection in the Village?

“We’ll assume,” he said, “that she’s gone to Los Angeles. It seems indicated.”

“I agree,” Bernard Gregory said, “but Los Angeles is a large city. How do you hope to find her?”

“The police have ways of finding people, whether they’re in Los Angeles, California, or in Blue Eye, Missouri. However, this is a delicate matter which requires extraordinary methods. Maybe we’d better proceed unofficially.” Here he paused, before capitulating, to curse once more the black perfidy of the commissioner. “It happens that I have a ... er ... contact in the Los Angeles area who may be able to help us. A maiden lady who was for years a gad ... er ... that is to say, a sort of unofficial member of this police force. I can assure you that she is”—and here he crossed his fingers below his desk—“the soul of discretion.”

“Whatever you say.” Bernard Gregory stood up. “I’ll leave it in your hands, Inspector. I can expect to hear from you?”

“Just as soon as I have anything to report.”

“Good. Thank you very much for your time.”

Inspector Piper came around his desk and shook hands. “You’d better send me a picture of your daughter,” he said. “I’ll send it along to my contact.”

“I have one here. It’s a good likeness, I think.”

He took a billfold from his pocket, removed a picture from an isinglass pocket, and passed it to the inspector. He repeated his thanks, said good-bye, and left. The inspector sat down again at his desk, laying the photograph face down in front of him. After a few moments, as though he had prayed for strength and the prayer was answered, he turned the photograph over and studied it.

What he saw was pleasing to his aging eye. Turned at an angle between full face and profile, the face that looked back at him from the corners of clear dark eyes had a kind of serene loveliness that touched his leathery heart. Good bones. Short, straight nose. Generous mouth and firm chin. Slender neck with a hollow at the base of the throat that the inspector, if he been younger, might have wanted to kiss. Smooth dark hair was skinned back severely and gathered in a bun, giving her the sophisticated look she surely strived for. Now, wherever she was in her hippie world, if the hippie world was where she was, the hair was probably unpinned and hanging down her back. The inspector was offended by the thought. He didn’t know why, exactly, except that he liked her as she was in the photograph. Still studying it, he reached for the phone.

“Get me Miss Hildegard Withers,” he said to the switchboard operator. “I don’t remember her number or address offhand, but she lives in

Santa Monica, California.”

2.

HILDEGARDE WITHERS, RETIRED SCHOOLMA'AM, retired gadfly to the NYPD, but still the active and durable friend of Inspector Oscar Piper, although presently removed from his company by the width of a continent, which the inspector considered in his sour moments as being none too great a distance, was in her yard gathering the basic ingredient of her next salad when the phone inside her house began to ring. She was in no hurry to answer it. Indeed, being convinced in advance that the communication, whatever it was, would prove to be both inconsequential and dull, she was rather indifferent about answering it at all.

The truth was that the spirited and equine-ish spinster was finding life nowadays rather a bore. She had discovered that the sunset years, as described in glowing terms in the free literature of realtors and chambers of commerce out after the social security trade, were inclined to develop, after a while, a surfeit of serenity. Not, of course, that she didn't find her personal sunset on the whole pleasurable. She had Talley, her standard poodle, for company. She had her neighbors and her African violets for diversion. She could pick her salads in her own yard. When she wished to resign herself to the prospect of being swallowed up in good time by the illimitable universe, which required more humility than she ordinarily had, she could sit on a rock and watch, like stout Cortez with eagle eye upon a peak in Darien, the immeasurable waters of the wide Pacific.

Only it wasn't, of course, Cortez. It was Balboa. Odd that a genius like Keats should have made such an egregious error. But perhaps it was an error no more egregious than the one she had made in swapping coasts. It would be nice, she thought sometimes, to divide each year equally between both. She had been sorely tempted lately to fly back East for a long visit with her old friend, Inspector Oscar Piper, in time to catch New York in fall and leave it again before winter.

The phone inside continued to ring in long bursts with dogged tenacity. Suddenly she read into the sound a compelling urgency. Surely any casual friend with nothing more on her mind than a luncheon date or a committee meeting would have given up long ago. Leaving Talley in command of the yard, she hurried inside and snatched up the raucous instrument. A strange

masculine voice asked her to identify herself, which she did breathlessly after her tardy dash from the yard, and then, immediately afterward, she was momentarily deprived by pleasure and excitement of what short breath she had. For in her ears, more beautifully golden than the remembered tenor of the not-so-late John McCormack, another Irishman, was the irascible bark of Oscar Piper.

“Hildy?”

“Oscar! Oscar Piper!”

“Long time no see, Hildy. How are you and the angels getting along?”

“I’m not quite ready for the angels yet, Oscar. All in good time. Meanwhile, you’ll have to be patient.”

“Well, you were long enough getting to the phone. I was beginning to suspect that you’d already been snatched away. Where were you, anyhow? Out in the yard picking oranges?”

“Not oranges, Oscar. Avocados.”

“Imagine picking avocados in your own yard. Imagine, for that matter, picking avocados anywhere. Surely you don’t eat them?”

“You always were a person of questionable tastes, Oscar. There *is* other food in the world than spaghetti, you know.”

“Spaghetti!” The inspector’s voice was suddenly dreamy and a little sad, and Hildegard Withers was acutely aware that it originated more than three thousand miles away. “It doesn’t taste the same somehow, Hildy, without you across the table. How would you like to have a big plate with me right now, with a bottle of Chianti to share?”

“Shut up, Oscar! I’m far too old to cry.”

“That’s an invitation.”

“Don’t be rash. You may have me on the next jet.”

“Well, to tell the truth, I wouldn’t want you to come that soon. I’ll need you where you are for a while yet.”

“What do you mean, Oscar? Explain yourself.”

“That’s my Hildy. You sound exactly like you were snapping at some elementary urchin in that school where you used to slave.”

“*As if*, Oscar. Like is a preposition or a verb. You shouldn’t use it as a conjunction.”

“There you go. Correcting my grammar at God knows how much a minute. Anyhow, what’s good enough for Winston is good enough for me.”

“Oscar, you’re being evasive. It’s apparent that this is not just a friendly call, and as much as I would like to think that you were motivated only by a longing to hear my voice, you had better come clean. What’s on your mind?”

“Nothing much. Just a simple little job. It occurred to me that a superior compulsive snoop like you would be just the one to handle it. Besides, you happen to be on the scene.”

“Thank you, Oscar. You have such an ingratiating way of putting things. Precisely what is this simple little job?”

“Finding a runaway, that’s all. A wandering flower child. Her name is Lenore Gregory, aged twenty-one, and she took a powder about two weeks ago. It’s not really a police job, certainly not Homicide’s, but I’d like to lend a hand if I can. Her parents are really in the saucepot. Father says Mother is on the verge of a breakdown.”

“What quality of fools is this?”

“What’s that?”

“Never mind. Some words of Tennyson. A sadly neglected poet these days.”

“Oh. We have reason to believe that this girl may be in Los Angeles, Hildy, or in the immediate area. Naturally, I thought of you right away, stuck out there in exile and probably dying to get back in harness.”

“Oscar, you seem to be afflicted with that strange provincialism that is common in many New Yorkers. You simply cannot rid yourself of the illusion that the nation beyond your city limits is composed entirely of countryside and villages. For your information, Los Angeles is a sizable city. In the matter of square miles, indeed, it is considerably larger than New York. Are you seriously suggesting that I comb the area in search of one small, wayward girl?”

“Use your ingenuity. You’ll manage.”

“It’s flattering of you to think so. Or is it merely artful. Consider, for example, the question of transportation. As you know, I don’t drive. How do you expect me to get from one place to another?”

“That’s no problem. Fly. Use your broomstick.”

“Very funny, Oscar. Very funny, indeed.”

“Seriously, Hildy, I wish you’d take it on. Listen to me. Lenore Gregory is a lovely girl. Her father’s a corporation lawyer, well heeled, and the girl is apparently carrying a bundle with her. Over a grand. She’s driving

a Volkswagen with a gaudy paint job of daffodils, so it ought to stick out like a sore thumb even in that loony-bin you live in. Moreover, as I said, she's one of the flower children. She's probably gone straight to wherever the hippies are. You must know the places in your neck of the woods. If not, you can find out. That should restrict your search considerably. Will you give it a try?"

"Why should I?" The retired schoolma'am's sniff was clearly audible on the other side of the continent. "How many times have you referred to me as a gadfly, Oscar Piper? How many times have you told me that the New York Police Department is perfectly capable of getting along without my help?"

"Judas Priest in a jug! Don't tell me you're getting paranoid in your old age! All right, Hildy. If it gives you any pleasure to make me squirm, I apologize. Be a good girl and lend a hand. It'll get the rust out of your pipes, and it'll get me off the hook with the commissioner. Tell you what I'll do. If you'll play ball, I'll give you a call the next time we have a really juicy murder here, and you can come running."

"Is that a promise?"

"My oath on the Book."

"Oscar, you've got your fingers crossed."

"Hildy!"

"Oh, all right. You've known perfectly well all along that I wouldn't be able to resist. If I locate this girl, what am I supposed to do with her?"

"There's nothing much you *can* do, as a matter of fact. Talk with her. Try to make her come home, or at least get in touch with Mama and Papa. Reassurance is what they need more than anything else right now. Make sure the girl's all right, not in any trouble or anything, and report to me. I'll pass the information along."

"What if she's *not* all right? What if she *is* in trouble?"

"We'll hope she's not. If she is, you stay out of it. Let me have the grim details, and I'll put Papa on the job."

"I'll need a complete description. A photograph would be better."

"I have one. I'll shoot it right out to you."

"Very well, Oscar. I'll do my best to get you and the New York Police Department off the hook once more."

"Thanks, old girl. It's noble of you. Now I've got to hang up. This call's costing the city a fortune. Take care of my favorite schoolma'am,

Hildy.”

“Be assured that Hildy will. Good-bye, Oscar.”

Miss Withers hung up and strolled slowly out into her yard again. If she had been less conscious of the proper deportment for spinster ladies, to say nothing of the opinions of neighbors, she might have chortled aloud and kicked up her heels. The gravelly voice of Inspector Oscar Piper had been a potent tonic. It had lifted her spirits, which had been drooping, and had filled her with all sorts of errant and extravagant hopes. No doubt she was being foolish, incited by wishful thinking to absurd expectations, but nevertheless the warm golden air was suddenly more invigorating, and her restricted regimen all at once expanded. There was really, of course, except for the pleasure of communication with an old friend, no justifiable reason for exhilaration. The assignment she had accepted was likely to prove more tedious and dull than otherwise. Surely there was little enough to stimulate one in the prospect of hunting down a silly young girl and trying to convince her of the error of her ways. What Oscar called legwork.

Still, it was a challenge. Finding an elusive fugitive in the vast Los Angeles area, even a fugitive with daffodils painted on her Volkswagen, would be a difficult task, if not impossible. Moreover, if the truth must out, Miss Withers nourished a faint hope of unexpected developments. It was not that she really wished Lenore Gregory any more trouble than she deserved. It was just that she hoped, in an unspecified kind of way, that her assignment would turn out in the end to be more than it seemed to be in the beginning.

She stooped to scratch the ears of Talley, who had approached in all confidence that he would get his ears scratched. She strolled across her manicured lawn and inspected her bright and thriving flower beds. But she was hardly aware of what she was doing, for her mind was already at grips with the preliminary problem of finding, so to speak, a needle in a haystack. There was to begin with, as she had said to Inspector Piper, the quite fundamental one of getting about, the plain and simple necessity to get from one place to another with a minimum of delay and difficulty. In this sprawling city and its environs, geographically giant-esque, this would be no easy matter for a maiden lady with no vehicle of her own and no instruction in driving it, even if she had one. Taxis were not readily available hereabouts, as they were in eastern cities, and the cost of hiring one for prolonged service would be, besides, prohibitive.

In addition to the problem of getting around, there was the question of where to go. Miss Withers tried to keep abreast of the times and reasonably aware of the contemporary scene, but she was not well versed, she had to admit, in the habits of hippies. She saw them here and there, singly and in pairs and small groups, usually identifiable by their long hair and unkempt clothes and the strong impression, even when they were downwind, of unwashed bodies, but she had not made a practice of invading their haunts and locating their colonies. Venice, right next door, had its share, she understood. Laguna Beach, she knew, had its. Surely you could find them on the Sunset Strip. She had read about the love-ins in Griffith Park. But it was all so far removed from the orderly world of a retired schoolma'am whose extracurricular experience had been confined for the most part to such orthodox deviants as murderers and assorted felons. She needed instruction. She needed, in fact, a guide.

Distracted by her problems, she gazed across intervening lawns and flower beds at the familiar sight, three houses down the block, of young Aloysius Fister tinkering with his motorcycle in his driveway. Miss Withers was fond of Aloysius, although she disapproved of him and invariably gave him, when the opportunity arose, sagacious advice which he good-naturedly ignored. Aloysius was a college drop-out. He had been doing quite well at UCLA, Miss Withers understood, and then without warning he had simply withdrawn and come home. The only reason he gave was that he had reached the conclusion, after implied soul-searching, that college might not be the answer to a lot of things, at least for him, and he was deferring any further academic endeavor until he could decide where he wanted to go and what he wanted to do after he got there. Meanwhile, insofar as Miss Withers could see, he did nothing at all, unless you counted going to the beach and forever tinkering, as now, with his motorcycle.

What he needs, she thought, *is to make himself useful*. And seconds after the thought, her purpose hardly formed in her mind, she found herself approaching him resolutely.

"Good morning, Aloysius," she said.

The young man flinched and grinned wryly, brushing straw-colored hair out of his eyes with the back of a greasy paw. "Please, Miss Withers! I'll tell you what I'll do. If you'll call me Al, I'll call you Hildegarde."

"You'll do nothing of the sort, young man. If you prefer to be called Al, I'll be glad to comply without any concession on your part."

“Fair enough.”

“However, I deplore your attitude. Aloysius is a fine old Irish name. I’m quite partial to the Irish.”

Al Fister grinned again, and the grin did pleasant things to his homely, sun-tanned face. In spite of certain early fore-warnings of a dissolute character, Miss Withers thought he was really quite a charming boy. His straw-colored thatch, with a kind of obstreperous will of its own, was not amenable to the discipline of comb or brush. His eyes, which crinkled at the corners when he grinned, reflected the amiability of his temper, which was pacific by nature and conviction. He was dressed in a soiled white T-shirt, a pair of faded blue Levis, and filthy sneakers.

“I’m glad to hear it,” he said. “If you’re looking for my mother, she isn’t home.”

“I’m not looking for your mother,” Miss Withers said. “You’re the one I want to speak with.”

“Another lecture, Miss Withers? What have I done now?”

“It isn’t what you’ve done. Quite the contrary. It’s what you *haven’t* done. So far as I’ve been able to observe, you haven’t done anything whatever.”

“Maybe you haven’t observed enough.” Al’s grin was ready, his amiability undisturbed. “You might be surprised at what I’ve been doing when I was out of your sight.”

“That may be. I doubt that I should be favorably impressed.” Miss Withers sniffed audibly and somehow severely. “I’ve decided, young man, that you need something constructive to do. You need to *contribute*.”

“It’s nice of you to think of me, Miss Withers, but I wouldn’t want you to worry.”

“I’m sure you wouldn’t, and so I won’t. To begin with, Al, I’d like you to tell me what you know about the peculiar breed of human beings referred to as hippies.”

“Hippies?”

“Yes. Surely you’re familiar with them?”

“Who isn’t? They’re all over the place. What do you want to know about them?”

“Primarily, their major places of congregation and habitation. Also, how one might go about making oneself familiar with them.”

“Well, you can find them on the Strip, in Griffith Park, at Laguna Beach. There happens to be some right over in Venice. They spill over, of course. Like I said, you can find them all over the place. After all, the Establishment hasn’t reached the point yet of keeping them on reservations.”

“The Establishment?”

“Sure. The established order. The squares and their fuzz.”

“Fuzz, I believe, is a rather derogatory term applied to the police?”

“That’s right. The cops.”

“How would you like to be, so to speak, a kind of unofficial member of the fuzz?”

“Not me.”

“Nonsense. It would give you a sense of responsibility, and it would be a service to me. If it offends you to be a part of the Establishment, you can pretend that you’re Philip Marlowe. I should think that even you would have no objections to playing private-eye.”

Understandably, a trace of bewilderment was beginning to encroach on Al’s expression of amiable tolerance. As a matter of fact, he liked this old chick. In her way, she was pretty cool. But sometimes she seemed to be way out, like now, and he wondered if she had her full quota of marbles.

“Look, Miss Withers,” he said desperately, “maybe you’d better just tell me what you’ve got on your mind. Like straight out, I mean.”

“A commendable suggestion. Here, like straight out, is what I have on my mind. I have been commissioned, in a manner of speaking, by a certain rather important member of the fuzz to try to locate a young lady of twenty-one years who is suspected of being in the Los Angeles area. Specifically, in one of the areas frequented or inhabited by hippies. Her name is Lenore Gregory, and she is a member of a substantial New York family. No crime is involved, I assure you. It’s simply a matter of locating the girl and reporting her whereabouts. Her mother and father are naturally, distraught.”

Al swallowed all this without a gulp. Indeed, he had heard rumors to the effect that Miss Withers was not in all ways exactly what she seemed, and that she had had, in fact, a pretty checkered career in New York City before moving West. Having heard the rumors and having now heard what she had to say, he was beginning to feel, actually, a stirring of interest, in her proposition. It might provide a welcome break in his reflections on where he wanted to go and what he wanted to do when he got there.

“And you want me to drive you around to these places so you can try to pick up this girl’s trail,” he said. “Is that it?”

“Precisely. I shall, of course pay all expenses.”

“Well, Miss Withers, I’d like to help you, and that’s the truth, but I’m pretty sure my dad wouldn’t relinquish the family wheels, and all I’ve got is the Hog.”

“The *what*?”

“The Harley.” He affectionately patted the saddle of the ominous-looking machine he had been tinkering with. “The Hog.”

To Miss Withers, the name seemed highly inappropriate. She was inclined to think of it rather as a Brahman bull or a bucking bronco. It looked as if it would immediately try to throw off anyone who was rash enough to climb on.

“Does this machine come equipped with a sidecar?” she said.

“I could attach one if I had it, but I don’t.”

“They are available, however, are they not?”

“Oh, sure. Why?”

“Young man, if you think for an instant that I’m going to *straddle* that thing, you have even less sense than I give you credit for. You will buy a sidecar today at my expense. When I’m finished with it, it will become your property.”

“You’ll need a crash helmet too. It’s against the law to ride a motorcycle without one.”

“Merciful heavens! However, if one must, one must. It is necessary, after all, to show proper respect for the law.”

And so it happened that Miss Hildegard Withers, in the best tradition of chivalry from Camelot to La Mancha, went forth to rescue a fair damsel in distress, riding sidesaddle, so to speak, on a Hog.

3.

AFTER ALMOST A WEEK of fruitless searching, she was beginning to feel, it must be admitted, more akin to the fantasy-ridden don than to any of Arthur's knights. She had started out with the naïve notion that her assignment was simply one of tracking down a willful and deluded girl, no doubt spoiled rotten by permissive parents, and giving her, after finding her, the benefit of a few choice words about the facts of life. It was not, of course, that easy. As she rode forth each day on her mechanical Rosinante, Don Quixote to Al Fister's Sancho Panza, she became increasingly aware that her quest did not take her simply from one town to another, or from one part of town to another part, but into another world, if not another dimension—the twilight world of the hippies, who lived by rules she did not know and spoke a language she could only imperfectly understand.

It was a strange world, as she came to know it, a world where pot and peyote replaced the dry martini, where LSD and desoxyephedrine enlarged the vision of pale ghosts of real people who dreamed and drifted but did not dance to the music of the sitar played by Ravi Shankar. Like others who lived outside this world, she had fallen into the common error of thinking of the hippies as rebels, but now she began to understand that they weren't rebels at all. They were secessionists. Unable to accept or change the system, they had simply split, flaked off, voluntarily got lost. And lost, she thought, they were. Going nowhere, they had lost their way. The beat generation. When she was young, more years ago than she cared to count, it had been the lost generation. The years of the expatriates. Now, doing her legwork on Sunset Strip, riding the Hog in a helmet to Laguna Beach or wherever the hippies were and the Lost Lenore might be, making her inquiries and watching the contemporary breed on the bright beaches or in psychedelic joints or community pads smelling of pot, she kept remembering a phrase, a title used long ago by Scott Fitzgerald for one of his books: *All the Sad Young Men*. And all the sad young women. That was the adjective. That was the *mot juste*. These young people were sad. Sitting with folded hands in limbo. Contemplating a kind of universal navel in a chemical nirvana. Negative. Nothing to do and nowhere to go. Even their sex, which permeated their haunts, was a kind of negation. Sex is so

convenient when it's too much trouble to love. The nothing world. Nada. But it isn't, Mr. Hemingway, a clean, well-lighted place.

Miss Withers on the hippie scene stuck out like the proverbial sore thumb. In all of hippiedom no one was less a hippie than she. When she started out on her excursions, she faithfully wore, pushed over her bun as a concession to the law, the crash helmet that the law prescribed; but carefully preserved in a box at her feet in the sidecar was her current selection from the inventory of astonishing hats that had invariably incited the derision of Inspector Oscar Piper. When the Hog was deserted and the excursion pursued afoot, she abandoned the helmet and donned the hat, feeling fully dressed for the first time since leaving home. In bars and coffee shops and even appearing suddenly to the gaping vision of a startled initiate in the open doorway of some shabby pad to which she had gone on a false scent, she was a stern apparition who probably caused more than one runaway disciple to remember uneasily the days of rapped knuckles and home arrest.

On one occasion, informed of the event and the date by Al Fister, who read the *Los Angeles Free Press* and otherwise kept tuned to the grapevine, she wandered among the incomprehensible, and to her indescribably dull, happenings of a Griffith Park love-in. She had gone with Al as escort with more than a little trepidation, expecting a kind of unwashed public orgy. Nothing of the sort. Indeed, she observed no liberties exercised between the sexes to exceed, or even equal, those she had been aware of (by hearsay, or course) between young men and young women driven to indiscretion by the scent of honeysuckle and red clover on the picnics of her youth. She could not possibly understand, to begin with, how any one of the motley assemblage could have been incited to the slightest intimacy with any other one. They were unkempt and uncombed and frequently unwashed, as unprepossessing a lot as she had ever seen assembled in number, and about them, real or imagined, was the pervading smell of a neglected armpit. On an improvised stand of scrap lumber, a group which called itself the Dharma Bums created an unholy din with amplified guitars, an uninhibited electric organ, and pounding drums. On the grass, couples danced barefooted, detached, out of contact, each apparently indifferent of the other's movements, or even to his presence. There was an abundance of free food for the taking, donated or begged or borrowed or collected from the refuse of markets, but Miss Withers did not take any. She wandered through the crowd, remembering, with a nostalgia intensified by the present

contrast, the far-off Saturday night open-air concerts she once attended, when the band played marches and simpler selections from the classics, and the trombone player, who was also the vocalist, invariably sang “My Buddy” or “There’s a Long, Long Trail A-winding” or something else left over from the Kaiser’s war. She was saddened and a little angered by being made to feel so dated. So *impotent*. She stood for a while and listened to a young man with long blond hair and a meager blond beard, dressed in an old army shirt and Levis and a pair of Jesus sandals, who was leaning against the bole of a tree and strumming chords on a guitar and singing softly to himself a song about someone called Mr. Tambourine Man. She moved on and came across a female child in her teens, some distance apart, sitting Indian-fashion on the grass and reading a paperback book of poems by Ferlinghetti. She engaged the child in conversation, but the conversation was not a success.

The most frustrating thing about her experiences, apart from a general confusion, was the evasiveness she constantly encountered. One thing became apparent. There was a conspiracy of protection among them, the beats or the hippies or the flower children or whatever the sect within the body, and all of them, card-carrier or teeny bopper, displayed incredible slyness in dealing with the outsider, the straight, who seemed to pose the slightest threat to the security or independence of a member of their subculture. This posed for Miss Withers, being an obvious straight, an almost insurmountable problem. In at least one other instance of her incurable snooping, she had pretended to be what she was not, assuming a disguise in the interests of the case, but to assume the character and appearance of a hippie was palpably beyond her powers and her stomach. She wondered glumly if she was doomed after many a brilliant performance to a final flop.

It was Al Fister who suggested the tactic that finally put her forrader. Having returned late at night from hours of futile searching, they were stoking themselves in Miss Withers’ kitchen with cold milk and cake. Al was in reasonably good spirits, not feeling in the matter the same urgency that gave fuel to Miss Withers, but the latter could not remember feeling so utterly defeated since she had, years ago in New York, nearly come a fatal cropper in the affair of four missing ladies.

“Al,” she said, “we simply must devise a new approach to our problem.”

"If it was me," said Al cheerfully around a cud of cake, "I'd just forget it."

"If it *were* I," Miss Withers corrected testily. "The subjunctive mode and the predicate nominative. Didn't they teach you any grammar at all at that academic factory you attended?"

"I guess it didn't take." Al grinned, reaching for the cake and the knife. "Anyhow, I'd forget it."

"Young man, I don't admit defeat so easily. However, I realize that you have a record as a drop-out. If you want to give up, you are free to do so."

"Not me." Al shook his head, his amiability undisturbed. "To tell the truth, I'm beginning to think this is a gas. Besides, that chick in the picture flips me. If you finally make her scene, wherever it is, I want to be alongside."

"Please try to speak English. I'm a little tired of translating jargon."

"Well, if you want to keep with it, do you know what I'd do?"

"Inasmuch as you haven't told me, I don't. I am, however, open to suggestions."

"I'd get the help of a pro, that's what I'd do."

Miss Withers, her pride wounded, was instantly on her dignity. She gave Al the full effect of a frigid look of pedagogic severity. "Young man, I may not be an official member of any police force, but I assure you that experience gives me some claim to professional standing. Moreover, this is a case requiring the utmost discretion. It is better handled privately. I was specifically informed on that point by my old friend Inspector Oscar Piper."

"I wasn't thinking of the fuzz—the police. I was thinking of a bounty hunter."

"Bounty hunter? Is this more jargon?"

"Well, you've heard of the bounty hunters of the old days in the West, haven't you? Guys that made a gig out of tracking down outlaws for the rewards that had been put on their heads? They're just the same now, except they don't track down outlaws. They track down hippies."

"Are you saying that there are men who make a job of this sort of thing?"

"Sure. That's what I said. A gig. Lots of kids run away from home nowadays to come out here to LA or San Francisco to join the hippies, just like this chick we're looking for. The old folks at home get uptight about the whole thing, naturally, and sometimes they'll hire one of these bounty

hunters to find the kid for them. Sometimes he lets them know, but sometimes, if the hippie's got any bread, he works both ends and doubles the take by agreeing to keep what he knows to himself."

"I've never before heard of anything so despicable. How does one go about contacting a bounty hunter?"

"They don't advertise, you know. You can see why. They're in a kind of a sensitive position, I mean. Undercover. They're not hippies, but they fake it because there's a lot more to be learned inside than outside. It would be rough if anyone got hep to them. I mean, hippies are all for love and peace and all that, but some of them might lose their cool if they found an informer in the nest. Besides, there are the motorcycle clubs like Hell's Angels to look out for. Those cats don't object to any violence, not at all, and they've taken the hippies to raise."

"Well, I have no intention of running about to evil-smelling and depressing places asking perfect strangers with long hair and beards if they happen to be bounty hunters, or if they could please direct me to one. I've had quite enough of that sort of thing. If the bounty hunter can't advertise, there is no reason why I can't. The problem is, I am committed to discretion. How does one advertise without attracting the publicity we wish to avoid?"

"You might try the *Free Press*. It circulates mainly among the beats and the hippies and people like that. The straights and the squares hardly know it exists, and they wouldn't read it if they did."

"It sounds a disgraceful sort of newspaper, if you ask me. However, in a matter of this kind, it will probably suit our purpose exactly. As a precaution, I shall try to be deceptive. My advertisement must avoid proper names, and it must be couched in terms which will make it fully understood only by someone with reason to understand."

"I don't dig."

"Never mind. You'll dig in a moment."

Miss Withers got up and left the kitchen, returning shortly with paper and pencil. Meanwhile, Al had cut his third slice of cake and poured his second glass of milk. Miss Withers sat down, nibbled the eraser of her pencil in concentration, and then wrote rapidly and briefly.

"There," she said, reversing the paper and pushing it across the table toward Al. "That should do nicely."

Al leaned forward to read: *Wanted—1967 blue Volkswagen sedan decorated with daffodils. Urgent. Will pay well.* This message was followed by Miss Withers' home phone number. Nothing more. If it was intended to be cryptic, as it apparently was, it was too cryptic for Al. It was late, of course, and he was tired and stuffed with cake and milk, and so it was perhaps understandable and excusable if his mind was not working at peak efficiency.

"You were wrong," he said. "I still don't dig."

"It's really quite clear," Miss Withers said. "Who, wanting to buy a second-hand Volkswagen, would specify a blue one decorated with daffodils? One buys what the market offers and paints it afterward as one wishes. The point is, Lenore Gregory, as I have told you, was driving just such a vehicle. It was surely noticed and remembered wherever she went. I submit that any person except a UCLA drop-out would understand immediately that I am not interested in the car, but the driver. Let us hope that our bait brings up a proper fish."

"Meaning someone who knows where she is and is willing to sell her out?"

"Precisely. The use of stool pigeons, Aloysius, is common practice in police procedure. The end justifies the means. And now, if you have finally had sufficient milk and cake, you had better go home to bed. Your brain, I fear, clearly needs restoration."

4.

MISS WITHERS SAT ALONE on a bench in Venice, her head covered with the magnificent creation of an anonymous milliner, her purse, clutched firmly by both hands, in her lap. To the right and left of her stretched a long line of other benches, most of them unoccupied. Behind her, running parallel to the line of benches, was Ocean Front, a wide street restricted to all traffic except official vehicles. In front of her, stretching two hundred yards to the ragged edge of the blue Pacific, was the littered sand of the beach. On the beach, between her and the ocean, was a long, low public bathhouse. To the right of the bathhouse, as she sat facing it, at the foot of Navy Avenue, Lick Pier extended across the beach and into the ocean. On the pier was an amusement park and a dance hall, from which, in the plush days of radio, the schmaltz of Lawrence Welk had gone out weekly coast to coast. The dance hall had been called the Aragon then; now it was called the Cheeta.

Miss Withers appeared to be relaxed, taking her ease and perhaps a nap in the warm sun, with a soft sea wind touching her face and stirring the flowers of her magnificent hat. In fact, however, her senses were alert. On Ocean Front behind her, between the beach and the shops of Venice, the people of Venice passed and were now passing, the straights and the squares and the hippies and the elderly retired Jews who lived in the Ocean View Hotel at the corner of Ocean Front and Rose Avenue and went for entertainment to the Israel Levine Senior Adult Center. Miss Withers sat quietly and watched and listened. She waited.

She had arrived in Venice some twenty minutes earlier. Santa Monica, where she lived, was just next door, so to speak, and Al had whisked her over in jig time. They had left the Hog in a parking lot at the corner of Navy Avenue and Speedway, and Miss Withers afoot had crossed over a block to Ocean Front and then strolled along the Front to the bench where she now sat. Al, meanwhile, after allowing her a head start from the lot, had tagged after, and was now sitting some distance away on a bench of his own near Lick Pier.

Miss Withers had an appointment. Her cryptic ad had been answered. It was no longer than two hours ago that her phone had rung, and she had thought at first that it was some prankster on the line, for no one answered

when she spoke, although the line was open, and still did not answer when she repeated herself. She was about to hang up in disgust when the voice came over the line, and she could still feel, even sitting here on the bench in the warm sun, the crawling of her flesh when she heard it. She didn't quite know why. It was a soft voice, masculine, not offensive in any palpable way, but it seemed to have undertones of a kind of listless derision, giving the impression that it might at any moment, for no sane reason, break into a stream of passionless obscenities.

"Are you the party interested in the blue bug with a rash of daffodils?" the voice said.

All at once the phone began to tremble in Miss Withers' hand, for she knew instantly that this would be it. This would be the first break in what she had come to think of as the Case of the Lost Lenore, with apologies to Edgar Allan Poe. Until that moment she had not realized that the case was so important to her. Perhaps it was merely her pride, the dread of failure, however small. Clutching the phone, she responded calmly.

"I am. Do you have such a vehicle?"

"Not in my pocket. I know where one is."

"For sale?"

"You might make a deal."

"I'd appreciate it if you would tell me where I could find the car. It's most urgent that I find it. I'd pay you for the service, of course."

"Which makes my point. How much?"

"A reasonable fee. After all, you agree only to put me on the track of the car. You do not agree to acquire it for me and put it into my hands."

"Like a hundred skins?"

"Dollars? That's excessive. Like fifty."

There was a silence during which Miss Withers heard, or imagined she heard, the whisper of breathing on the wire. Then the voice came back.

"Why not? It's only bread."

"Where can I meet you?"

"There are all these benches lined up along Ocean Front in Venice. Go sit on one."

"When?"

"Say three o'clock."

"That will be satisfactory. I'm an elderly lady, definitely straight. I shall wear my hat with an arrangement of flowers and a cluster of grapes."

With these words, Miss Withers had hung up firmly, and now here she was on the bench in Venice, and here suddenly on the same bench, having approached with no discernible sound, was the man she had arranged to meet. Miss Withers, aware all at once of his presence, looked at him from the corners of her eyes. Although he didn't speak immediately, and in fact gave the impression that he might not speak at all, she knew instinctively that he had not sat down on her bench by chance. He was the man, all right. Probably in his late twenties, he was tall and thin and rather stooped, and despite an attitude of lethargy, there was something alert and watchful about him. His lank black hair hung over his collar at the back of the neck, but it had been trimmed, not too recently, over his ears. His sideburns grew down to his jawline, but his face was otherwise smoothly shaven. He had veiled eyes and a bold, hooked nose and a thin, cruel mouth. His skin was dark, the color of copper, and he might have had, Miss Withers thought, Indian blood in his veins. She waited for him to speak, and after a while, in his own good time, he did.

"To begin with," he said, "let's drop the shuck."

"The what?"

"The shuck. The phony bit. The fraud. You're not interested in a psychedelic VW. You're interested in the chick who was driving it."

"Quite true. I assumed that that was understood. And I agree that we had better abandon all pretense. I'm prepared to give up mine if you will give up yours."

He turned his head to look at her directly, and his veiled eyes, which seemed to be jet-black, revealed through slits a flicker of surprise. "Mine?"

"Your pretense of being a hippie. You are, of course, nothing of the sort. You're a spy, that's what you are. An informer. Otherwise, you would not have called me. Perhaps you are other things that are worse, but no matter. I'm here to do business with you, however distasteful it may be."

His eyes glittered. His thin lips split in a wolfish grin. "Well, you have to make the scene, you know, if you want to score. You can't learn inside when you're outside. You want to know something, moms? You're not such a funky straight as I thought."

"Thank you very much, I don't think. But we are not here to exchange either compliments or slanders. I'm looking for a girl, and you apparently know where she is. I'll pay you fifty dollars when you have told me."

“Why the hassle? Live and let live, moms. What’s the big thing about finding this chick?”

“That is no concern of yours. However, I assure you that it’s for her own good. No harm will come to her.”

“No trouble with the heat?”

“If you mean the police, certainly not.” Miss Withers, being addicted to the truth, made an unobtrusive King’s-x. “The police would hardly send an elderly lady out to do their business.”

“Well, this chick rode in here on her Volks and crashed the pad of another chick up on Ozone Court. They knew each other from somewhere, it seems. Anyhow, they had a powwow in the pad one night, and I make the scene. It didn’t take long to see that this Lenore chick offered possibilities to a cat with a little initiative. Probably a teeny bopper who’d split. A runaway with maybe pops back home ready to lay out a little bread to get her back. What’s more, she was faking it. She’d never been turned on. No grass. No acid. No nothing. The only high she ever had she got from folk rock. Oh, she was in tune, all right. She was intellectually sympathetic, I mean, full of peace and love, with a flower for everybody, but she wasn’t a member of the club. I had this feeling that she had a box full of bread, but I couldn’t get a lead on her. Not until I read your bit in the paper and made the connection. Now I’ve got a feeling I’m selling cheap.”

“Where is the girl now?”

“She split. Like ten days ago. Went north with her daffodils.”

“North? Can’t you be more specific?”

“Do I have to spell it, moms? The town by the Golden Gate. San Francisco. Is there any place else north?”

Miss Withers felt her heart sink like a stone. It had been a dispiriting and exhausting experience searching a great city for one elusive girl, without any help whatever from the vast network of the metropolitan police, and she wondered if she had the strength or the will to carry the search alone to still another city and renew her contact there with the dim and disturbing subculture of hippiedom. Of course, she needn’t necessarily do so. Even Inspector Oscar Piper would not demand so much. She had done her job, and if she hadn’t been able to learn precisely where Lenore Gregory was, at least she had learned where she wasn’t. Why not let it go at that? Why not, indeed? Miss Withers, if asked, could not have said. All she

knew, having sniffed fifty skins' worth of scent on a trail growing cold, was that she couldn't and wouldn't.

"Did she ever mention her purpose in going to San Francisco?" Miss Withers asked.

"Well, I wasn't exactly her guide. I mean, we didn't huddle up and exchange secrets, or anything like that. But I've got big ears. I've got this habit of hearing things. She talked to this other chick with the pad about something big that had her flipped, a happening out of the world. Whatever it was, she was heading to make the scene."

"Did she mention names?"

"She dropped one. Carol Hadley. I've got this habit of remembering names. You never know when they'll come in handy."

"It's apparent that you have many habits. Are they *all* bad? However, I must concede in this instance that your information has, as you put it, come in handy. I don't suppose you could tell me where to find this Carol Hadley?"

"Wrong, moms. I can. And if you'll quit bugging me, I will. She's doing her bit at SFU."

"San Francisco University?"

"That's what I said. This Lenore chick was planning to crash her pad for a few days."

"Address?"

He shook his head sharply, whipping his lank hair. "Endsville, moms. I'm turned off. You got my load for fifty skins. Pass me the bread, and I'll split."

"That," said Miss Withers, "is a most pleasing prospect."

Removing from her purse a thin packet of five crisp tens, she passed it over. Her informer took it and shoved it at once, without counting, into a side pocket of a pair of dirty Levis. He stood up, looking down on her for a moment, and his thin lips split again in a grin of wolfish derision. Without a word, he turned away and started down Ocean Front in a kind of flapping, slow-motion lope.

Watching him go, Miss Withers knew what it was that had most disturbed her in her brief excursions into the strange underworld of the hippies. She had felt from the beginning something insidious, a dank pervading atmosphere of evil that she couldn't understand or justify. In a way, she thought, the hippies were a manifestation of incredible innocence.

Many were so young, and all were so sad. Flower children with a message of love, liberating themselves from a violent world by the power of pot and psychedelic drugs. Dedicated secessionists from an ugly establishment, flying high and always coming down in a pustule of dirt and disease and addiction. Mistaken they were, frequently infuriating and often lost. They were touched hourly by evil, but evil themselves they were not. No. The sense and smell of evil came from creatures of prey like the one now loping off up Ocean Front. It rose like a thin and fetid miasma from the avaricious who gather wherever the vulnerable are. Rising, Miss Withers made certain that her hat was securely in place and walked briskly down the promenade to the bench where Al Fister sat waiting.

“Al,” she said, “please take me home at once. I am badly in need of a bath.”

Al laughed and stood up and fell in alongside. “Any luck?” he said.

“I don’t know if you would call it luck or not,” said Miss Withers.

“And if you would call it luck, I don’t know if you would call it good or bad. In any event, I have learned that our young runaway has gone to San Francisco. Her motive and her precise destination remain to be discovered.”

In a short while she was clambering out of the sidecar of the Hog and heading up the walk to her house, Al tagging behind. In the living room she veered off toward her bedroom, speaking over her shoulder as she went.

“I must see if I can wash off the smell of that creature. I’ll be back shortly, Al. Meanwhile, if you feel inclined to spoil your dinner, you will find a piece of roast beef in the refrigerator and the remains of a chicken. I’m sure you can find something to satisfy you. It has been my observation that you have no difficulty in that respect.”

Al accepted the invitation and kept on going into the kitchen. He constructed a thick sandwich of roast beef, lettuce and mayonnaise, and sat down at the kitchen table to eat it. He could hear the shower running in the bathroom, where Miss Withers, skipping the luxury of a tub, was scrubbing away at the stink of corruption. After a while the sound of the shower stopped. Al got up with his empty plate and served it with a drumstick and a wing, leaving half a breast out of consideration for Miss Withers. The wing was gone and the drumstick was going when Miss Withers, scoured and refurbished, appeared in the doorway.

“It is now eight o’clock in New York,” she said.

“In Boston, too,” said Al. “In Kansas City, though, it’s only seven, and only six in Denver.”

Miss Withers plainly considered this embroidery too facetious to merit a response. “Inspector Piper,” she said, “will be at home by this time, if he is not still out to dinner or somewhere else.”

“As I see it,” said Al, “that takes in all the possibilities.”

“I mean, unless circumstances are exigent, that he will no longer be in his office in Centre Street. We shall see.”

Miss Withers crossed the kitchen to the extension telephone and dialed from memory. She waited, drumming a rapid tattoo on the cabinet beside her. Pretty soon the voice of Inspector Piper came on.

“Oscar,” Miss Withers said, “I was afraid you might be out carousing.”

“No such luck, Hildy. I’ve just had my Geritol and was thinking about tottering to bed. What’s up?”

“I merely wish to report that I’ve picked up the trail of your wandering flower child.”

“Good for you, Hildy. I knew an expert snoop like you could run her down.”

“She hasn’t exactly been run down. She’s in San Francisco. At least she said she was going to San Francisco when she left here.”

“How long ago?”

“About ten days.”

“Did she say why she was going?”

“No. My informant said that she was apparently excited about something big. A happening out of the world was the way he expressed it, as I recall.”

“Did she say where in San Francisco, exactly?”

“She mentioned stopping with a girl named Carol Hadley. A student at the University of San Francisco. Where she’s gone from there, if anywhere, remains to be determined.”

“Well, then, that’s that. You’ve done all you can do, Hildy. I’ll get in touch with Gregory and put it up to him.”

“Nonsense, Oscar. If you think you’re going to pull me off this case, you’re badly mistaken.”

“You’re planning to go to San Francisco?”

“Certainly. I’ll leave tomorrow.”

“That’s gallantry above and beyond the call of duty, Hildy. You’d better stay home and take care of your poodle and your African violets.”

“Poor Talley has been neglected so long that a little longer won’t hurt him. He’ll be quite comfortable in a kennel, and a neighbor can watch over the violets.” Miss Withers was silent for a moment before continuing. “I’ve been developing a feeling about this girl, Oscar.”

“What sort of feeling?”

“I don’t know. An *uneasy* feeling.”

“Come off, Hildy. Don’t tell me you’re getting another one of your premonitions.”

“Call it what you like, Oscar. I simply have a feeling that it’s urgent that someone find Lenore Gregory in a hurry.”

It was Inspector Piper’s turn for a moment of silence, and when he broke it, his voice was larded with suspicion and worry. “See here, Hildy. You wouldn’t be holding something out on me, would you?”

“Not at all, Oscar. I’ll be in touch with you again when I have further news to report.”

“Good enough.” He sounded suddenly gruff. “And for God’s sake, old girl, try to stay out of trouble.”

“I shall do that for *my* sake. Good-bye, Oscar.”

“Good-bye, Hildy.”

She hung up the phone and sat down at the table with Al. “And so,” she said, “to use the expression of that despicable creature in Venice, this is Endsville. Here’s where you get off.”

Al got up and poured himself a glass of milk and sat down again. “That’s right,” he said. “Now that you’ve used me as long as you think you need me, throw me out! Don’t let me stick around when things begin to get good! Oh, no!”

“Don’t be absurd. You’ve been a great help, and I’m grateful. There is simply no need for you to go all the way to San Francisco for something that is, after all, not your concern.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. It seems to me, when you come right down to it, that it’s as much my concern as yours. Besides, I’m getting a little tired of being a drop-out. Think of the money you could save on plane fare.”

“Young man, are you suggesting that I ride all the way to San Francisco in the sidecar of that vehicle of yours?”

“Why not? It would be a gas. After all, you’ve already ridden it farther right here in the county. We could go up the coast and see Big Sur on the way.”

Miss Withers gazed at him reflectively. She was, indeed, becoming quite fond of this boy. “It might be a pleasant ride, at that,” she said.

5.

SAN FRANCISCO IS AN enigma. In little more than a century, a willful child among the cities of the world, it has somehow managed to become a legend and create a myth. At once raffish and sedate, vibrant and mellow, it clings to yesterday, wallows in today, and reaches for tomorrow. Nursed on gold and weaned on silver, it cherishes the cultural flowering of a ribald tradition. People who live there are sorry for people who don't.

San Franciscans are sophisticated. They practice, on the whole, a remarkable tolerance. Perhaps the heirs of Emperor Norton can do no less. The Italian fisherman from the waterfront condescends to rub elbows with the nabob in tails at the Opera House, and the substantial citizen, trapped in his gig from nine to five, accepts with something like resignation, if not indulgence, the beats of North Beach and the hippies of the Hashberry. The uninhibited climate of the city by the bay seems to collect, indeed, more than its fair share of extravagant and entertaining kooks, the gifted oddballs from all over. It hatches, moreover, a considerable quota of mavericks among the natives.

Jack London slept here. Ken Kesey still does. The arts flourish, and some of the artists even profit. Quondam madams of the tenderloin devote themselves in retirement to the production of literature or the management of sanctioned enterprises. The high priest of the Satanic Church holds weekly Sabbats for his converts and lives in a black house with a full-grown Numidian lion that sleeps at night at the foot of his bed. Where undercover cops leave off—the beatnik-busters who achieve local flame by infiltrating North Beach pot parties—the narcs take over as boyish government agents in search of addicts and pushers. Meanwhile, chemistry majors are working their way through school by making LSD and desoxyephedrine in college labs, and amateur gardeners are growing marijuana among their pretty flowers.

The sun rises east of Berkeley and sets in the Pacific just west of the Golden Gate. If the average square sits down tonight to dinner at home, and if Mr. Cleveland Amory prepares to dine in style in the Garden Court of the Palace-Sheraton, you will also find the Diggers passing out free food in the Panhandle. San Francisco is inured to extremes and in-betweens. Variety is

the spice of life. It has been called a city of perennial renaissance, and it has also been called a whacky city where almost anything can happen and generally does. It is seldom shocked, which would be naïve, and it never points, which would be rude. It is, in brief, a city in which hardly an eye was batted and nary a double-take was taken when Miss Hildegard Withers was swept up to the entrance of the Canterbury Hotel at 750 Sutter Street in the sidecar of a Harley Hog.

Miss Withers had chosen the Canterbury, at which she had entered a reservation by telephone the night before, because its rates were more compatible with her income than were those of more lavish hostelries on Nob Hill, and because, so she understood, the management was inclined to be partial to elderly ladies. She removed her crash helmet and donned her hat, and passed hatbox and traveling bag to an impervious doorman who stood by.

“Al,” she said to her chauffeur, “I shall expect you back here in an hour.”

“As near as may be,” said Al.

“Are you sure you can find accommodations with your friend at SFU?”

“No sweat, Miss Withers. I called him last night and gave him warning. I can’t say that he was exactly enthusiastic at the prospect of my visit, but he agreed to put me up.”

“Someone,” said Miss Withers, “is always crashing someone’s pad.”

She turned and swept into the lobby. Her bag and box, which had been transferred to the custody of a bellboy, were waiting for her side by side at the desk. The clerk, although sharing a vague posture of superiority with hotel clerks everywhere, was accommodating under a veneer of courtesy. Miss Withers’ reservation was checked and found in order. Miss Withers signed the register. Joining her bag and box in the custody of the bellboy, Miss Withers was lofted to her room, deposited, and left.

Alone, beginning with a bath, she set about repairing the ravages of her journey. Bathed and brushed, assured that all her parts were present and in working order, she dressed and consulted her watch. Her repairs had occupied her for somewhat longer than half an hour. She had allotted more time than that, and realized that her hurry was incited by the nagging sense of urgency that had grown within her, for no logical reason that she could isolate, in the case of the Lost Lenore. She lay down for a while on the bed,

forcing herself to relax physically if not mentally, and when the hour had passed and no call had come up to her from Al at the desk, she got up and adjusted her hat, an impressive creation somewhat resembling a psychedelic silo, and descended to the lobby. Al was late. Perhaps he had run into problems. She sat down and waited.

Al was, in fact, more than half an hour late. Miss Withers, walking to meet him in the lobby, wondered why a laggard who had earned a reprimand should be looking so infernally pleased with himself. Miss Withers found out. Al, it developed, had taken the bull by the horns. He had exercised initiative and had performed an essential task, which would now relieve Miss Withers of the necessity of performing it herself.

“Sorry I’m late, Miss Withers,” he said cheerfully, “but I’ve been doing something. I was right over there by the campus, you see, and I thought, while I was there, that I might just as well find out where this Carol Hadley chick has her pad. This friend of mine didn’t have a student directory, so I went on campus and dug one up. Hadley and another chick share a pad on Fulton Street.”

“Good work, Al,” Miss Withers said. “You’re becoming more like Philip Marlowe all the time.”

“You think so? Maybe this snooping bit is my thing.”

“Thing?”

“My calling. What I’m made for.”

“I see. More jargon. You would save time with me, young man, if you would try to speak the King’s English, or at least a recognizable variety of American.”

They had been moving through this exchange toward the Hog, which Al had left under the eye of the doorman with an injunction to watch it carefully. Miss Withers switched hat for helmet and crawled into the sidecar. Al straddled the saddle, and they were off. A short while later they were pulling up in front of a narrow post-Victorian imitation, two and a half stories tall, loaded with gingerbread and bulging with bay windows.

“This should be it,” Al said, “or my name’s not Marlowe.”

Miss Withers disembarked, made the helmet-hat switch, and marched up the walk and across a porch to a high door between narrow leaded-glass panes. She knocked briskly and got no response. Turning the knob, she cracked the door and thrust her head inside. From a narrow hall, steep stairs ran upward. On the wall to her right was what appeared from where she

stood to be an improvised directory. Below the directory in a line were four mailboxes. She followed her head inside, closing the door behind her, and consulted the directory. Miss Hadley and friend, whose name was Bronson, were listed as sharing apartment number three. Assuming apartments one and two to be downstairs, Miss Withers logically assumed number three to be up. She climbed the stairs, and it was. The door was to her left as she stood on the landing. She knocked and the door opened promptly, revealing a young woman, twenty or thereabouts, dressed in a sweater and short skirt and green cotton stockings. Her blond hair, hanging loose, was parted in the middle and brought forward over each shoulder to hang down the front.

"I'm looking for Miss Hadley," said Miss Withers. "Are you she?"

"Sorry," the girl said, looking at Miss Withers' hat with something like consternation. "I'm Bronson."

"Could you tell me where I could find Miss Hadley?"

"You can find her right here if you want to wait. Chances are she'll be back soon."

"Perhaps you could help me in the meanwhile. I'm really trying to locate a Miss Lenore Gregory. I understand that she visited Miss Hadley in this apartment recently."

Bronson's young face, shaped like a heart and dusted with freckles, remained ostensibly open and amiable, but there was, nevertheless, a sudden, subtle change. It had closed. Miss Withers was encountering again the same evasiveness that had frustrated and infuriated her all along. Was everyone more than a few years past the age of consent considered by the contemporary youngster to be a potential enemy? Was there a universal conspiracy among them to thwart intrusion and prevent the invasion, real or imaginary, of their precious privacy?

"You had better wait and ask Carol about that," Bronson said.

"How long do you think I'd have to wait?"

"It's hard to tell. Probably not long."

"I feel that this matter is urgent. I'd prefer to go find Miss Hadley, if you know where she is. Do you?"

"She said she was going over to the Panhandle. She sits on the grass and reads."

"Where is the Panhandle from here? I'm afraid I'm not well oriented."

The young woman made a sweeping gesture to indicate direction. "Go over that way three blocks, and there it is. You can't miss it. I don't imagine

that you can miss Carol either. She's probably the only one there, male or female, with short hair. It's red."

"Thank you very much. If I should miss her there, I'll be back. My name, by the way, is Withers. Hildegard Withers. Miss Hadley doesn't know me."

Bronson looked as if she thought Miss Withers' name, like her hat, was hardly likely. The latter made her way downstairs and outside and back to the Hog.

"Al," she said, "I have a feeling that we are approaching the end of our trail. Our destination now is the Panhandle, which is a kind of appendage of Golden Gate Park. It is located, I believe, three blocks south of here."

"I know *what* it is and *where* it is," Al said. "Hop in."

Miss Withers, of course, did nothing of the kind. She had not hopped since her nonage and was not about to resume it in her dotage. She clambered into the sidecar with as much dignity as sidecars permit, and shortly thereafter she was clambering out again. The Panhandle, a block wide and several blocks long, pointed like a slim finger at Golden Gate Park, as if directing attention to the bright green heart of the city where the hippie tribes had gathered from across the nation not long ago in response to the call of the brothers Thelin. Miss Withers, being alert to the signs of the times, had read brief reports of the event in the newspapers, but she wondered why she remembered it now, having given it then no more than passing notice. Perhaps it was the result of her recent experiences. Perhaps it was because, no more than three blocks away, Haight crossed Ashbury and gave thereby a name to an area, and to hippies everywhere, before it began to decline in favor, a kind of psychedelic Mecca. Or perhaps it was because the thought lurked in her mind that Lenore Gregory, three thousand miles and more away, had heard a similar call from the underground. Hadn't the girl suggested in Venice that she was heading for something big? Something out of this world?

Miss Withers and Al had stopped and debarked about midway of the Panhandle, where Masonic Avenue slashed across the pointing finger, which left them two ways to go. As a method of conserving both time and energy, it was Miss Withers' logical conclusion that they had better go both ways at once. Al one way, that is, and she the other.

"You are looking for a girl with short red hair," she said. "See that you stay alert, and if you find her, bring her to me at once."

“Suppose,” said Al, “she doesn’t want to be brought.”

“In that event, come and fetch me without delay.”

Grinning, Al promised strict attention to duty and adherence to orders. He wandered off east, Miss Withers west, and as it turned out, it was Miss Withers, by a stroke of luck, who spotted in a matter of minutes the girl they were searching for. A slight girl with short red hair, wearing sneakers and jeans and a faded blue man’s shirt. She was lying on her belly on the grass, her chin supported in her cupped hands and braced on her elbows, reading intently in the diminishing light of the late afternoon sun a thick volume of fine print that Miss Withers, approaching obliquely, took to be a textbook of some sort. Miss Withers halted, a little rearward and aside. If Carol Hadley was aware of her, she gave no sign. Miss Withers delivered herself of a small, intrusive cough. Carol Hadley did not visibly react.

“I beg your pardon,” Miss Withers said.

The girl swiveled her head, looking up over a shoulder. “What for?” she said.

“For intruding, of course.”

“You’re not intruding. It’s a public park.”

“One is entitled to be let alone, even in a public park. I’d like to talk with you, if I may. I’ve come a long way to see you.”

The girl dog-eared a page of her book and shut it with a slap. She rolled over and sat up, hugging her knees and resting her chin on top of them. She slanted a curious look upward, a candid inventory which politely avoided any expression of incredulity when it took in Miss Withers’ hat.

“Am I supposed to know you?”

“No. My name is Withers. Hildegard Withers. And your name is Carol Hadley. I left Santa Monica very early this morning to look for you.”

“If I don’t know you, how does it happen that you know me?”

“I don’t know you, really. I learned about you indirectly. May I sit down?”

“If you don’t object to the ground. It belongs to everybody.”

Miss Withers lowered herself with an agility rather surprising in one who might have been suspected of brittle bones, to say nothing of rheumatism and maybe arthritis. She removed her hat and would have liked to remove her shoes.

“What do you want to talk with me about?” Carol Hadley said.

“I’ll come straight to the point. Within the past ten days you’ve had a visitor. A girl from New York named Lenore Gregory.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Please. Let’s not waste time parrying. I have good reason to believe that you’ve seen her, and I have good reason for wanting to find her. Won’t you help me?”

“Why should I?”

“Because her father and mother are extremely worried and anxious to have word from her. I am, indirectly, their representative.”

Carol Hadley was silent for a moment. She sat with head and shoulders bowed, her knees now released, and plucked at the grass. “So that’s it,” she said. “Lenore was afraid of something like this. That her parents would have the hounds after her, I mean. She suspected cops or private detectives, though. It didn’t occur to her that she would be followed by a ...”

Carol Hadley, aware of the indiscretion to which her words had led her, broke off suddenly in what was almost a display of confusion. Miss Withers, neither offended nor dismayed, finished her sentence for her.

“By a snoop old maid who looks rather like a fugitive from a rest home. That’s all right, my dear. Others before you have been deceived by my appearance. It has the advantage in most cases of being what you might call an effective natural disguise. Never mind, however. Let me repeat my earlier question. Will you help me find Lenore?”

“How?”

“Simply by telling me where she is.”

“What if I don’t know?”

“Do you?”

Again Carol Hadley was silent, plucking grass. This time longer. But finally she answered. “Yes. I know. I tried to get her to contact her parents, but she was afraid.”

“Afraid of what?”

“Of this. That they’d try to get her back before she had time to do what she felt she must. Lenore’s very intense.”

“She is, I understand, of age. Her parents can’t force her to return if she doesn’t wish to.”

“That’s not the point. Actually, Lenore loves her parents, though you may doubt it. Especially her father. She was afraid that she wouldn’t be able to defy them if it came to an issue.”

Miss Withers thought again of the words of Tennyson, that neglected Victorian, the words she had quoted in part over the telephone to Inspector Oscar Piper: *What quality of fools is this, to hurt the most the ones they love the best.*

"I see. So it was easier simply to run away. Do you know Lenore well?"

"Oh, yes. I lived in Manhattan for years before coming out here with my family. Lenore and I were in school together."

"Did you also know her parents?"

"Yes. I've been to their apartment several times."

"Do you think they deserve the treatment they're getting?"

"I guess I don't, really. They're dreadful stuffed shirts, of course, but I liked them. They mean well."

"You would be doing them and Lenore a great favor if you were to tell me where to find her."

"Do you think so? Perhaps I would. To be honest, I've not been quite easy about what she plans to do. Something about it stinks."

"What does she plan to do?"

For the third time Carol Hadley hesitated, but Miss Withers was now aware of a singing sense of triumph. She had broken through. At last she had managed to penetrate that pliable, passive resistance that had threatened constantly to defeat her.

"All right," Carol Hadley said, her decision made and her bridge burning behind her. "I'll tell you, and if that makes me some kind of traitor, to hell with it. I don't mind admitting that it will be a relief. Lenore's going on a cruise to the Far East. To India and Japan. On a private yacht, very hush-hush. It's supposed to be a kind of pilgrimage to the lands of Zen. There are fifteen or twenty of them going, and they're all chipping in, whatever they can, on expenses. The owner of the yacht calls himself Captain Westering, which sounds phony, and I don't think he knows much about sailing or navigating or anything like that. The yacht is called *Karma*, the Hindu word for Fate. Lenore tried to talk me into going along, and I did go down to the waterfront to talk to this Captain Westering about it, but when I saw how things were, I said no, thanks. I was sworn to secrecy, of course, but now I've broken my word all to hell, and I don't care. I'm glad. The yacht is an old one that used to belong to Errol Flynn or John

Barrymore or someone like that, and I doubt if it ever gets to the Far East, or even halfway, and what I'm afraid of, to tell the truth, is that it will sink."

"I gather from your tense that the yacht is still moored at the waterfront?"

"Yes. It's at a commercial dock in the bay, where it's supposed to be getting fitted out and stowed and provisioned for the voyage. It should have sailed long before now. Lenore called me only yesterday and said they were running into all kinds of problems."

"Where is Lenore staying?"

"On board the yacht. All the passengers are. Most of them, at least."

"And where is the dock?"

And again, for the last time, on the verge of her final revelation, Carol Hadley hesitated beside her burning bridge in the land of the enemy, clearly torn, although too late, between her better judgment and a tenacious personal loyalty. Miss Withers did not make the mistake of trying to prod her in one direction or the other. Wisely, she merely waited.

"I suppose," Carol Hadley said, "that I can always comfort myself with the thought that I've done the sensible thing like a good little girl, even though I shall have broken my word and shall feel like a louse. Having told you so much already, I may as well tell you the little that's left ..."

And so it happened that Miss Withers stood at last, at approximately the hour of nine thirty of an April evening thick with fog, on a commercial dock in San Francisco Bay and looked up through fog at the looming rakish bulk of the yacht *Karma*. She had been delayed in her arrival, in spite of an almost irrational compulsion to hurry, by the compassionate act of stopping at Alioto's on Fisherman's Wharf to fill with broiled sea bass an aching cavity between the intestines and diaphragm of Al Fister. Al was now beside her on the dock, stoked and revived, her staunch confederate.

In her nostrils were the salt-scent of the fog and the odor of crab pots. She could not shake an insidious sense of foreboding, an instinctive apprehension, and she found herself thinking, for no good reason, of the old and evil days of the Barbary Coast, not many miles from where she stood, when marauding, vicious crimps prowled the waterfront dives, and murder was done nightly on the dark docks. Why had she thought of murder? Faint light came from a few portholes of the aging yacht. From somewhere, behind one of the portholes, came the sound of a strummed guitar, a man's voice singing, other voices raised now and again above the sounds of the

strings and the singing. Miss Withers found herself shivering, not solely the effect of the damp fog that seeped through her clothes and laid chill, presumptuous fingers on her flesh.

“Al,” she said, “I’m going aboard. Remain here, please, until I return.”

The gangplank was down, inviting trespassers. Beneath Miss Withers’ sensible shoes, the deck of the old yacht, once walked by the hallowed feet of Barrymore or Flynn or whoever, rolled ever so gently in quiet water, which made a soft and cadenced slapping sound against vessel and piling. No one challenged her or moved to intercept her as she made her way toward a dim rectangle of light coming amidships from below. The apparent indifference to security combined with the somehow stealthy sounds of the muffled darkness served to increase Miss Withers’ sense of dread. Descending narrow stairs into a narrow passage, she paused and listened, facing aft. The guitar and the singing and the sporadic interjection of raised voices were louder here. They came from behind the closed door of a stateroom on her right. She moved to the door and put her hand on the knob.

She paused again, diverted by another sound. An alien sound from another source. A sound imposed with a kind of dreadful irrelevance on other sounds. She heard it once and not again, but it came, or so it seemed, from behind a closed door aft, at the end of the brief passage and facing directly up it. What sound? The harsh catching of the breath in someone’s throat? No. Not quite. More, Miss Withers thought, like a truncated whimper of terror or despair.

Silently and swiftly Miss Withers moved to the door at the end of the passage and tried the knob. The door was unlocked. She opened it without hesitation into a stateroom that was obviously, from its size and location and fittings, the quarters of the owner or captain or both if they happened to be the same man. On a bunk to Miss Withers’ right as she faced into the cabin was the sprawled body of a man, face down, one arm hanging limply over the side, fingers trailing on the floor, and one leg drawn up as if fixed there by death in a contortion of agony.

For the man, Miss Withers knew with dreadful certainty, was dead. Crouched over his body was a girl. Hearing the door open behind her, the girl straightened slowly and turned around, exposing a face coarsened by terror and drawn by fatigue. Her mouth was slightly open, and her eyes glittered like glass shards. One hand came up slowly to her mouth, as if to

stop a scream. In spite of all distortions, it was a face Miss Withers, by dint of photography, recognized at once.

She had found at last the Lost Lenore.

6.

LENORE GREGORY SPOKE. HER voice was an eerie whisper that seemed to originate independently of her body, the merest breath of despair, a ghost of sound that Miss Withers could hardly hear.

“He’s dead! Oh, God, he’s dead!”

Miss Withers took a step forward into the room. Without taking her eyes off the girl, she reached behind her and shut the door. The click of the latch was like a clap of thunder in the dead silence of the room. Swiftly, moving without sound, she brushed past the frozen girl and knelt beside the body on the bunk. There was no pulse in the wrist of the dangling arm. The flesh was very warm, almost feverish. The dead man’s head was turned so that she could look into his staring eyes. His jaws were locked, as if he had died grinding his teeth in convulsive agony. Miss Withers stood erect and turned to the girl, whose rigid body seemed at that instant to break up in a massive shudder. With a shrill little whimper, she plunged suddenly across the cabin and into the head, from which came the sounds of violent retching. After a few minutes she reappeared, her face haggard and bloodless but now composed.

“Why?” Miss Withers said.

Lenore Gregory’s expression did not change. In her eyes, dark and enormous in her pale face, there was a flicker of something like wonder that died instantly. Her voice was pitched low, so that Miss Withers had to listen intently to distinguish words, but it was under control. She had, it seemed, purged herself by her attack of retching of both nausea and incipient hysteria.

“I don’t understand,” Lenore said.

“Why did you kill him?”

“Kill Captain Westering? I didn’t kill him. Why should I?”

“For no reason, I hope. It’s just as well to have the matter cleared up at once.”

“Why do you assume that he was killed at all? He had an attack of some kind. It must have been his heart. When I came back, he was lying face down in his berth. He seemed to be in pain and was having convulsions. He died just then. I didn’t even have time to call anyone.”

Miss Withers, who was no stranger to the various effects of poisons, was skeptical. Locked jaws and convulsions did not strike her as compatible with a heart attack. Moreover, while kneeling beside the body, she had looked into staring eyes and noted dilated pupils. Detectable to the sharp old nose that had been poked often before into murderous business that was really none of hers, there had been, finally, a pungent odor, faint but unmistakable, that was familiar but elusive. What was it? The answer lurked on the dark edge of her mind, waiting for light. Whatever else it was, it was the smell of murder, but Miss Withers, for the time being, did not make an issue of it. Instead, she pounced like a tabby on a particular word.

“*Back?* You say you came *back?*”

Lenore Gregory opened her mouth to answer and then closed it suddenly with a snap of teeth. A belated seriocomic expression, equal parts suspicion and astonishment, invaded her face in a delayed reaction to the apparently inexplicable presence of this mysterious and inquisitive apparition who had appeared suddenly, with no warning whatever, as if she had materialized from nothing and dropped in from nowhere. Whoever she was, she was obviously a trespasser and possibly a threat. She was as out of place on this yacht among a ragtag and bobtail collection of amateur Argonauts as a vicar in a fleshpot. No one could possibly have suspected for a moment that the angular and acrid Miss Withers, with her spinsterish aura and her absurd hat, was a tardy pilgrim to the holy lands of Zen.

“Wait a minute,” Lenore said. “Why are you asking me these questions? Who are you? Where did you come from? What do you want here?”

“There is no time to go into all that now,” Miss Withers said crisply. “Later I’ll explain everything. Now, if possible, we must see what can be done about extricating you from a very difficult position.”

“What do you mean? I came in here and found Captain Westering dying in his berth, that’s all. Why should I need to be extricated from anything?”

“It depends, I should think, on two things. First, how did Captain Westering die? Second, will the police believe your story? Precisely what, by the way, *is* your story? Perhaps you had better tell it to me briefly. If it is not plausible, we may have to edit it a little.”

“Oh, nonsense. What we had better do is call a doctor. It’s too late to do any good, of course, but there will have to be a death certificate or

something.”

“That won’t be necessary. The police will supply their own doctor. They call him a medical examiner.”

“You keep harping on the police. Why should the police be involved at all?”

“Because, my dear child, Captain Westering did not die a natural death. If you have any such foolish hope, put it right out of your mind. He ingested a lethal dose of some kind of poison. He was murdered.”

“Murdered!” Lenore’s face, which had begun to recover its natural coloring, went white as chalk again. Her great dark eyes swam with resurgent terror. “What makes you think so? How could you possibly be sure?”

“You will simply have to trust me. We don’t have time for lengthy explanations, I tell you. Exactly what happened here tonight so far as you were concerned?”

“Well, Captain Westering asked me to see him in his state-room tonight. In here, I mean. To discuss things about the voyage we were going to make. It was supposed to be a kind of cooperative voyage, with everyone chipping in whatever he could, and I had more to contribute than some of the others, and so Captain Westering seemed to feel that that gave me a right to sort of be on the inside and have a kind of voice in things. Anyhow, he discussed things with me and asked my advice and all, and that’s why he wanted to see me tonight.”

“How much have you contributed to this fantastic venture?”

“It’s not fantastic. Nothing of the sort. At least, it wasn’t until now. I had about a thousand dollars when I arrived, and I got another thousand by selling my Volkswagen.”

“That’s a considerable sum. What has been done with it?”

“I’m not sure. Perhaps Aletha would know.”

“Who’s Aletha?”

“She’s Captain Westering’s wife. Or was. I have to keep reminding myself that he’s dead.”

“Where is she now?”

“Living conditions are rather crowded here on the yacht, so she’s been staying with her sister in Sausalito. She’s there now, I guess. I don’t know.”

“All right. We’ve digressed again, and we haven’t time. Finish telling me what happened. Be as brief as you can.”

“Nothing much happened, really. After dinner, which mostly came out of cans, Captain Westering asked me to meet him later in his cabin. I said I would, and when I got here he had out the decanter of sherry that he kept for me because I can’t seem to drink strong liquor without getting sick, and not very much of the sherry, but then I remembered that I’d agreed earlier to go ashore with another girl here on the yacht. Rebecca Welch. I told Captain Westering that I’d be back in a short while and went to find Rebecca, to tell her I couldn’t go ashore with her, and finally I found her in the crew quarters. We talked for a while, and then I came back here and found Captain Westering just dying in his berth, and right afterward you were suddenly here too.”

“You must have come down the passage just ahead of me. We barely missed each other. How long were you gone after leaving Captain Westering?”

“It must have been half an hour or so. As I said, I had to look for Rebecca, and then we talked.”

“I see. The story is plausible enough. How many of your collection of Argonauts knew that Captain Westering kept a special supply of sherry for your consumption when you visited him in his cabin?”

“I don’t know. It was no secret.”

“Is that it there on top of that chest?”

“I think so. Yes, I’m sure it is.”

Miss Withers crossed to the chest and examined the decanter without touching it. With her handkerchief she removed the stopper and sniffed the contents, bending over and poking her nose close to the opening. Lacing the odor of the sherry there was, just barely detectable, the same scent that had bugged Miss Withers’ memory before. A common scent that she should recognize. The scent of death and what else? Miss Withers carefully replaced the stopper. On the chest beside the decanter were two glasses. One of the glasses had been drunk from. The nutty odor of the sherry lingered in it. Captain Westering, waiting for the return of Lenore, had clearly helped himself to a glass while waiting. Too bad for Captain Westering. The sherry had surely killed him.

“You,” said Miss Withers, “are a very lucky young lady.”

“Lucky?”

“Indeed. The poison, whatever it is, is in the sherry. Does that suggest anything to you?”

Lenore was silent, her breath caught in her throat, and Miss Withers, watching her intently, was forced to give her points. Within that almost fragile loveliness was surely a stout heart. A pulse throbbed in her throat, and her dark eyes flared. Otherwise, she showed no sign of shock.

“Who would want to kill me?”

“That’s a very good question. I suggest that you think about it seriously.”

“It isn’t necessary to think about it at all. I’ve only known these people about a week. A day or two longer. Just since I got here.”

“I could name a few murderers, my dear, who were complete strangers to their victims. Did Captain Westering make a practice of inviting you into his cabin for sherry?”

“I told you. We discussed the voyage. While I was here I usually had a glass of sherry.”

“From this decanter?”

“Yes. As I said, Captain Westering kept it especially for me.

“Did he ever have a drink from the same decanter?”

“I don’t recall that he did. He drank something else. Scotch, I think. He made fun of me a little because of the sherry. Because I couldn’t drink stronger liquors, I mean.”

“It’s not, I should say, a particularly regrettable deficiency. Never mind that, though. You can surely see that the poison, having been put into the decanter, must have been intended for you.”

“How do you know it was put into the decanter?”

“My senses are still quite good, young lady, including my sense of smell. The poison is in the decanter. You may be certain of that.”

“What kind of poison?”

“I’m not positive. I can’t quite identify the odor.”

“Then how do you know it’s poison?”

Miss Withers had been warned that Lenore Gregory was a headstrong young lady. She was now more than prepared to believe it. Resisting an impulse to shake the girl until her teeth rattled, she answered with a crisp tone of authority, very much as she had used to address an obstreperous small fry back in her days as a schoolma’am.

“I don’t intend to discuss the matter now. You’ll see for yourself in good time. You don’t seem to understand, young lady, that I’m trying to help you. Can’t you see that your position is perilous? I think someone has

tried to kill you, and he has only failed by the merest chance. That, however, may not be the position of the police. I've had considerable experience with the police in cases like this, and I've observed that they invariably have a powerful penchant for the obvious. I stepped into this stateroom and found you bending over the body of a murdered man. Their first assumption will be that I surprised you in the act of murder."

"That's insane. Absolutely crazy. I admired Captain Westering. Why should I kill him and ruin all our plans?"

"We'll get to those plans later. For the moment, I wonder if it would be indelicate to ask just what expression your admiration took?"

"If you're asking if we were lovers, we were not." And lifting her head in a little gesture of pride that struck Miss Withers as being somehow pathetic, she added defiantly, "Not yet, anyhow."

"I've no doubt that Captain Westering was a romantic and persuasive man," Miss Withers said drily. "And you, my dear, are a lovely and impulsive girl. A highly combustible mixture of qualities, if I may say so. Perhaps what your precise relationship was is not important. What may be much more important is what someone *thought* it was. We'll know in time. Now we've delayed long enough. We must act."

"Well, you seem to have taken charge. Tell me what to do."

Miss Withers was silent for a minute, thinking. She could hear, coming from the forward stateroom, an undulating drone of sound, voices rising and falling in talk and song, and she realized that the sound had been there all the time as a kind of background to the silence of this grim room, which seemed somehow unbroken even by the hushed and urgent words of the elderly woman and the young woman standing there in the presence of death. It was strange, Miss Withers thought. Strange that a man could die alone in an agony of convulsions a few short yards from company and help. Why hadn't Captain Westering cried out or staggered into the passage? Had the poison that killed him, whatever it was, been too swift and deadly? Or had he, feeling the poison's first effects, simply crawled into his berth unsuspecting, thinking they would pass and realizing too late that they would not?

"On the dock," Miss Withers said, "you will find a young man waiting for me. His name is Al Fister. Go and tell him to find a phone and call the police. Tell him to return as quickly as he can and to see that no one leaves

this vessel before the police arrive. You will, of course, come back aboard to wait with the rest of us.”

Lenore Gregory turned to go, and at that moment the stateroom door suddenly flew open without a sound to reveal against the background of the short passage one of the most startling male creatures that Miss Withers, fresh though she was from the haunts of hippies, had ever seen. Tall, perhaps six-six, and thin as a slat, he wore a soiled white robe that flapped around his thin shanks some eight inches above the ankles. On his feet, otherwise bare, were Jesus sandals bound on with leather thongs. His hair was long and grizzled and greasy, hanging to his shoulders, and a grizzled beard, growing like a thicket from most of his face, hung down his front as far as a length of hemp rope that girded his waist. From this encroaching coppice of hair, set tight on either side against a bulbous nose, were two glittering little eyes that glared over Miss Withers’ shoulder at the body of Captain Westering. He looked, Miss Withers thought, like an obscene caricature of Moses. His voice, when he spoke, had a curious hollow sound, as if he were talking into an empty barrel.

“What are you doing here?” he said. “*What have you done to Captain Westering?*”

7.

MISS WITHERS, LIKE A solid Victorian period piece, stood grimly in a corner, removed slightly in space and immeasurably in spirit from the litter of human odds and ends that shared the stateroom with her. Besides her, there were seven people in the room. Flanking her on either side, casting covert glances of curiosity at each other across her spinsterish bosom, were Al Fister and Lenore Gregory. They had assumed their positions on Miss Withers' flanks in a kind of mutual and unspoken commitment, prepared on one hand to defend her against all comers, and deriving from her nearness, on the other, a measure of comfort and confidence. By Lenore, as a matter of fact, Al was incited to even more elevated reactions. Her dark, ascetic loveliness had burst upon him like a revelation on the dark dock in salt-scented fog, and he had been feeling ever since all thumping heart and outsized hands and feet. Sensing at once, even before his sense was confirmed, that she was somehow threatened by events, he had begun to burst with Quixotic fancies.

In another corner, sitting cross-legged on the floor with his thin shanks exposed, was the startling creature who had materialized earlier in the captain's stateroom like a soiled avenging angel to catch Miss Withers and Lenore in what appeared to be a shocking crime. Now, in his corner, he glared at the floor in front of him and engaged in a running monologue of dire mutterings. Every once in a while he would look up directly at Miss Withers. The sight of her seemed to arouse him to a perfect fury of invective, for his mutterings would rise abruptly in volume and tempo, sound tumbling over sound in a welter of gibberish. Miss Withers could make no sense of any of it. So far as she could tell, he was invoking in his private tongue the wrath of his personal gods. For her incomprehension she was thankful. She had an uneasy feeling that the gibberish, given sense, would have been unfit for the ears of an elderly virgin.

Miss Withers had been summarily herded into this small stateroom, which was next to the captain's and between his and the one in which, when she boarded the vessel, she had heard singing and the sound of talking. Her shepherd had been a certain offensive man called Captain Kelso, head of the Homicide Bureau of the San Francisco police. He was a hulk of a man,

with a bald dome and a beefy face that turned apoplectic-scarlet at the slightest provocation. He seemed to move awkwardly, in a lumbering gait, but Miss Withers had noticed that he managed, nevertheless, to get things done quietly and swiftly. After listening without expression to her preliminary account of events, and clearly feeling no need for her assistance in the investigation, which she was prepared to offer, he had ordered her in here to wait, and here she was, over an hour later, still waiting. Quite naturally, she resented such treatment. She could hardly avoid the feeling that one who had been accorded prerogatives by the Inspector of Homicide, NYPD, should be accorded at least equal prerogatives by the Head of Homicide, SFPD, who was, after all, only a captain.

In the stateroom next door, division being dictated by cramped quarters, another group of unlikely Argonauts awaited the pleasure of the police. Here in this one with Miss Withers and Lenore and Al were the Prophet Onofre, muttering curses or imprecations in his corner, and four others divided equally between the sexes. There was an obscure dancer from Los Angeles, wearing black leotards under a skirt not much longer than a figure skater's. She was sitting sidewise on a bunk, talking to a male folk singer from Dallas, Texas, who lay stretched out with his arms folded up and under his head. The calves of the dancer's legs were knotted with muscle. The folk singer's hair was dark red and very long, hippie style, which meant no style at all so far as Miss Withers could tell, except freedom to grow as long as it might in any direction it was inclined.

On a worn sofa which must have served someone as a bed at night, inasmuch as a pair of sheets and a thin blanket were folded up at one end, sat a blond waitress from Denver and an ex-policeman from San Francisco. They made, all in all, a rather terrifying couple. The waitress had pale hair, silvery in the dim light, with the most incredibly perfect face and the emptiest eyes that Miss Withers had ever seen. One saw such eyes, sometimes, in the faces of idiots.

Her companion on the sofa was a slender young man, about thirty. Among the deviants on the vessel, fantastic Argonauts collected from God knew where for God knew what, he acquired somehow a sinister quality from being ordinary. His light brown hair was neatly trimmed and combed. He had a plain face, like the one next door or down the block. He was wearing a white cardigan sweater over a white T-shirt, both of which were clean, and a pair of navy-blue slacks that had been recently pressed. Over

his eyes he wore a pair of glasses, tinted lenses in heavy plastic frames, which he removed every once in a while and held briefly by the bridge between a thumb and index finger, the exact repetition of an unconscious habit. Once he had turned his uncovered eyes directly upon Miss Withers, and she had felt in that moment a sudden chill pass through her flesh. The eyes were dark and lusterless, dead in their sockets, and she had an extravagant notion that they had looked for centuries, through countless reincarnations, on enduring evil. It was absurd, of course. The man was simply an ex-policeman. Probably a debased fellow who had been fired from the force for some kind of corruption, a hound who had joined the hares.

Being by nature inquisitive, Miss Withers had gathered this information bit by bit during the course of the last hour or so, some from Lenore, who had apparently decided to trust her from necessity if not from choice, and the rest by direct communication with the subjects themselves. Miss Withers was egregiously conspicuous among the hodgepodge of Argonauts aboard the vessel, a flagrant deviation from an abnormal norm who should have stirred up suspicion and distrust simply by her glaring squareness, let alone the mysterious suddenness with which she had appeared among them like death's companion. The fact that no one did, in truth, betray any extraordinary curiosity about her or animosity toward her, excluding the muttering Prophet in his corner, was an indication, she thought, of the temper of the motley crew, who accepted anyone because anyone might appear, and expected anything because anything might happen. Even, thought Miss Withers grimly, murder.

"Socrates!" said Miss Withers suddenly.

Al Fister, who had been looking at Lenore from the corners of his eyes across Miss Withers' spare bosom, leaped as if the spinster had ripped out a smoking oath and stabbed him with her hatpin for indulging in improper fantasy, which he very nearly had been.

"What?"

"Parsnips!" said Miss Withers.

Al examined Miss Withers with an expression divided between anxiety and apprehension. He had always known, of course, that the old girl was a little balmy, probably the effect of prolonged abstinence, but she had appeared to possess a certain shrewdness combined with admirable tenacity

and mental toughness. He had not anticipated that she might under exceptional stress fall apart at the seams.

“Miss Withers,” he said, “have you flipped?”

“If you mean what I think you mean,” Miss Withers replied with some asperity, “I most certainly have not. Nor am I likely to. Someone must remain sane in this assembly of maniacs.”

“I thought I heard you mention Socrates and parsnips.”

“So I did. A logical association of thoughts. I might have reversed the order, of course, but that’s of no matter.”

“Well, you know my limitations. UCLA drop-out and all that. Logic isn’t one of my strong points.”

“Socrates was an Athenian philosopher. Even your limited education should have made you aware of that. He was charged with corrupting the young of the city and was put to death for it, an extreme penalty which, if applied impartially today for the same reason, would have the guilty queued up outside every execution chamber in the country. That, however, is not the point. The point is, the Athenian method of execution was the oral ingestion of poison. Specifically, hemlock. If you are interested, Plato has left us a graphic account of Socrates’ death.”

“What I’m interested in is what this has to do with anything else you’d care to mention.”

“If you’ll please not interrupt, I’ll explain. When I was bending over the body of Captain Westering, I detected a faint pungent odor that I couldn’t quite identify. Later, when I sniffed the cream sherry that killed him, I detected the same odor. It was a common odor, one that I had smelled often before, and I’ve just now recalled what it was. It was the odor of parsnips. Hemlock and the parsnip are, I believe, members of the same botanical family. They smell alike, and the deadly roots of the former have the same appearance as the edible roots of the latter. Hemlock grows wild in this area. Livestock is sometimes poisoned by eating it. The roots are fat and filled with fluid. When cut, they bleed. Any knowledgeable person could easily collect enough of the fluid to poison half of San Francisco. You may be sure that it was used to kill Captain Westering, who was, I fear, no Socrates.”

“Come off, Miss Withers. Are you trying to tell me that some kook who knew about the Socrates scene, the corruption bit and all, actually *executed* this Captain Westering for the same reason?”

“No. It’s an intriguing hypothesis, and I don’t doubt that the good captain was guilty of his own brand of corruption, but it isn’t, unfortunately, tenable. Captain Westering was killed by accident. The intended victim, I’m convinced, was Lenore.”

This was news to Al. To judge from his expression, news of the most disturbing sort. Naked in his distress, so to speak, he now looked openly at Lenore with alarm and fierce protectiveness laid bare in his homely face among the freckles. Miss Withers, no stranger to the vicarious experience of romance, could almost hear the simmering of vital juices.

“What makes you think so?” Al said.

“I have good reason. Lenore will tell you later, perhaps, if she wishes to do so. Meanwhile, if I’m right, there may be a second attempt. We must take every possible precaution to guard against it.”

The other people in the room had gone on all this while with their own conversations—the dancer with the folk singer, the ex-policeman with the waitress, the Prophet with himself or his groovy gods. The quiet huddle in the corner had drawn no special attention, the three subdued voices no attuned ear. The sporadic attention of the Prophet Onofre, accompanied by frenzied mutterings, was restricted to Miss Withers alone and was prompted by pure, irrational animus that was innocent of curiosity. Al, Miss Withers’ grim warning still thundering silently in his brain, was plucking his nether lip, his brow furrowed by the giant effort of extraordinary cerebral action.

“I wonder who it was that left this tub while I was waiting on the dock?” he said.

“What!” Miss Withers’ voice was soft but sharp. “You saw someone leave?”

“That’s right. I just said so.”

“Why didn’t you intercept him?”

“Why should I? I didn’t know then that a murder had been committed aboard.”

“Of course. You had no way of knowing. Did you get a good look at this person, whoever he was?”

“Well, how good a look can you get in the fog at night? Besides, he was moving pretty fast. All I got was a kind of general impression when he walked under a light on the dock. He wasn’t too tall. About average, I guess. He was wearing a jacket, I think, and a pair of white sneakers. His

hair was long, like a hippie's, and I'm pretty sure he was wearing a pair of dark glasses. That's about all."

"It's something, at least. I don't suppose you could find more than a few thousand around Haight-Ashbury or Berkeley or Sausalito who would fit the same general description. What time was it when you saw him?"

"Right after you went aboard. As a matter of fact, I thought at the time you must have seen him on deck."

"I didn't. Which suggests that he took *care* that I didn't. If he was below in the captain's cabin, he must have come up from the passage just seconds before I went down. Moreover, if he was there, it had to be during the time when Lenore was away looking for her friend. Captain Kelso should have this information. Drat the man! What could he be doing in there all this time?"

Which was, of course, merely an expression of Miss Withers' annoyance and frustration. Veteran herself of more than one murder investigation, confidante and companion of Inspector Oscar Piper, Homicide, NYPD, she knew perfectly well what Captain Kelso was doing. He was doing a great deal, and doing it thoroughly, and he was seeing that a great deal more was done and done thoroughly by others. And it all took time. Suspects, meanwhile, including Hildegard Withers, could only wait with whatever patience they could muster.

If Miss Withers' patience was nearly at an end, so was her waiting. They had all been conscious throughout their period of detention of a miscellany of sounds around them—goings and comings in the passage outside, knocks and taps and scuffling in the stateroom next door, the rising and falling murmur of voices, punctuated now and then by a sharp bark, a discernible word. And now they were suddenly conscious of relative silence, unnatural silence, silence threaded with only the creaks and groans of the old vessel herself, wallowing at her dock, and the persistent soft lapping of dark water at the piles.

At that moment the door to the passage was opened, and Captain Kelso lumbered two steps into the room. His eyes culled the occupants and came to rest on Miss Withers. Lifting a meaty paw, he crooked a finger. "Sorry to keep you waiting so long, ma'am," he said, with more deference than Miss Withers had expected. "Still, I imagine you know well enough how these things go. If you will come with me now, please."

8.

MISS WITHERS WENT WITH alacrity. Captain Kelso's new and welcome touch of deference persisted. He even held the stateroom door open for her and allowed her to precede him into the quarters that had been occupied by the late Captain Westering. The captain himself, or what had been left of him, was now gone. The room showed unmistakable signs, obvious to an experienced eye, of the thorough investigation that had been made in here by skilled men who knew their jobs. A thin dust of powder had been left here and there, for example, by some disciple of Bertillon in what Miss Withers predicted silently would turn out to be a meticulous exercise in futility. Not that there would be a dearth of fingerprints. On the contrary, there would surely be a plethora. It was impossible to imagine otherwise on this weird vessel packed with undisciplined oddballs who must have slept three-deep at night and wandered almost at will when awake, even in and out of the sacrosanct captain's cabin. Except, of course, when the captain had been engaged in private conference with one of the crew-passengers, probably one of the prettier girls, and took appropriate steps to prevent interruption. The decanter, Miss Withers saw at once, had vanished.

Captain Kelso, now that he had brought her here, seemed to forget about her completely. He lumbered about with apparent aimlessness, paradoxically quick and quiet in the pursuit of nothing. He stood for a moment in the center of the room, staring at the floor. He moved to the berth where the captain's body had lain and stood staring down at the place where it lay no longer. He went over to the chest and pondered the place where the decanter had been. He even lumbered into the head and out again. From a hip pocket of his trousers he took a huge wad of soggy handkerchief and scrubbed his massive dome with it.

"This is it," he said.

"This is what?" Miss Withers asked.

"The blue-ribbon winner. The living end. Whatever you want to call it, this is it. I've been a cop in this town for forty years, most of them connected one way or another with homicide, and I've been on cases from the waterfront and Chinatown to Nob Hill and back again. I've run the gamut from nabob to hippie. This is San Francisco. We get all kinds here,

and I thought I'd met them all. I thought there was nothing left to see and nowhere else to go. My mistake." He shook his massive head from side to side, scrubbed it again with his soggy rag, and pushed the rag back into his hip pocket. "This," he said, "tops them all. This is the finest assembly of assorted nuts that I've ever had the rare privilege of meeting up with, privately or professionally."

Miss Withers, quite naturally, was indignant. She expressed her indignation. "Thank you very much," she said.

"Present company excepted, of course." His little fermented eyes rested significantly on her startling headpiece, which seemed to have some spiritual relationship with the city's famous hangover of Victorian architecture, and she had the definite impression that his exception lacked conviction. "You told me you were here on some kind of unofficial mission for the New York police."

"That's true. Specifically, for Inspector Oscar Piper."

"I know it's true. I've checked it out."

"You've talked with Oscar?"

"Not personally. I had a call put through from headquarters."

"I trust that Oscar was not too unpleasantly surprised."

"As I get it, he wasn't exactly surprised at all. More like resigned, he seemed to be. The lieutenant who put through the call said he said something like, 'Judas Priest, not again!' And then he said something like, 'I ought to have my head examined.' Maybe you can tell me what he meant."

"Nothing at all. Oscar is an irascible old curmudgeon. He was simply being unkind and unjust."

"Maybe so. Anyhow, he finally got around to vouching for you, and he said he'd appreciate all consideration we could show you. All right. I'm a considerate man, if nothing else. Will you please return the favor by telling me exactly what in the devil brought you into this unholy mess?"

"Certainly. I've been searching for a girl name Lenore Gregory. She disappeared quite some time ago from her home in Manhattan. Or, more exactly, she disappeared while she was presumably attending school in New England. It seemed to be indicated that she had gone to Los Angeles, and her father, who is a substantial citizen in Manhattan, wanted her found as quietly as possible. He made his way to Inspector Piper, who is actually head of Homicide and shouldn't have been involved, and that's where I

came in. I worked with Oscar on certain homicide cases when I was a resident of New York, but I've since taken up residence in Santa Monica, and so Oscar naturally thought that I, being on the scene, so to speak, might be able to help. To cut my account short, I traced the girl to San Francisco and to this dock, and I found her tonight aboard this vessel."

"I know. Standing over the body of a murdered man."

"I explained that. She had been in the stateroom earlier and had left to look for a friend. When she returned, after finding her friend, she discovered Captain Westering dying in his berth, where he had apparently thrown himself when he began to feel ill. He died while she was standing over him, before she could cry out or run for help."

"Let me remind you. That's *her* explanation. Not *yours*."

"So it is. And I believe it. It is simply impossible to suspect that child of murder."

"Child? Does a child run away from home and over three thousand miles across a continent to join a crazy expedition of some sort with a collection of questionable kooks?"

"That, I think, if you see what I mean, is precisely the kind of thing that a child *would* do."

Captain Kelso took time to look at her with a glimmer of grudging respect in his sour eyes. "I see what you mean, all right. Some people take a long time to grow up, and some never do. Like the current rash. Flower children all over the place, full of love and dreams and psychedelic drugs, perennial believers in fairy tales. Nevertheless, children have committed murder before. You know that as well as I do. Cops are simple people, and they like to *keep* things simple. When a girl is found standing over the body of a murdered man, with not a single witness to what happened before, she's the best suspect around until a better one comes along."

"She went to find a friend. You might ask the friend to verify it."

"We'll do that. Don't worry. If the friend does, it will be something, but not enough. The girl could have put the poison, whatever it turns out to be, in the sherry before she went away. Or, for that matter, any time before that."

"In the sherry she was going to drink herself?"

"There you go again. *She* says. Only she."

"Others may have known about the sherry."

"They may have."

“Anyone could have slipped in here and put the poison into it.”

“They could have.”

“If someone else knew about the sherry being Lenore’s, and if the poison was put deliberately into the sherry and not something else, it seems to me that our inference should be perfectly clear.”

“Enlighten me.”

“Why, Lenore was the intended victim, of course.”

Again Captain Kelso took time to look at her. He sighed and wagged his massive, naked head. “You’ve got a devious mind. You’re tricky. You should have been a criminal lawyer.”

“Not at all. My mind is quite direct, I think. It goes straight to the palpable, but it is not necessarily deluded by what only *appears* to be palpable.”

“You said if the poison was put deliberately into the sherry and not something else. What makes you so sure that something else *wasn’t* poisoned?”

“What else was there? I saw nothing else when I was in here immediately after the captain’s death, and I see nothing now.”

“You didn’t look hard enough. Maybe you were pressed for time. There was a bottle in the captain’s locker. Scotch. Two bottles, as a matter of fact. One hadn’t been opened, and so you can eliminate it. The other bottle was half full.”

“Had it been poisoned?”

“I don’t know. My nose must not be as sharp as yours.”

“Mine is at your service. Where’s the bottle?”

“Gone with the sherry. I sent it off for analysis.”

“The report should be most significant.”

“When I get it, I’ll pass it along.”

“By the way, it was hemlock.”

“What?”

“The poison in the sherry. It was hemlock.”

“How do you know? Are you a toxicologist or something?”

“Nothing of the sort. I am no more than a retired schoolteacher with a reasonably broad range of interests and a respectable fund of information. I know that the poison was hemlock because I could smell parsnips.”

“I see. That is, I think I do. If you’re right, it will make things a little tougher. No registered purchase or anything like that. You can’t trace a

poison that was dug up in a field or a backyard or along some road.”

“Unfortunately, there are many such poisonous flowers and plants. Meadow saffron, mushrooms, monkshood, foxglove, thorn-apple. Some are even cultivated deliberately in gardens for their decorative qualities. Much is made these days of marijuana’s easy availability, but there is an abundance of far deadlier plants growing everywhere around us. Any amateur botanist and chemist can supply himself with more poisons than the Borgias dreamed of.”

“Well, lots of kooks go on pot for their kicks, but damn few go in for making hemlock highballs. Lucky for us. Anyhow, you may be right. The medical examiner will let us know after he’s done the post-mortem. Maybe I’d better point him, though. Let him know what to look for.”

“It would be advisable. I think he’ll find that I’m right.”

“Do you know something?” Captain Kelso’s gravelly voice contained a note of incipient resignation, perhaps similar to that earlier detected in the voice of Inspector Oscar Piper. “I’ve got a sneaking suspicion myself that he will.”

He began again a lumbering, pointless prowling about the stateroom. Miss Withers, watching him, decided that she would be interrupting no cogent train of thought or vital course of action if she were to speak. She spoke.

“Not only could anyone have poisoned the sherry,” she said, “but he could have done it, whoever he was, at any opportune time.”

“Sure. That’s the beauty of murder by poison. Murder by remote control, you might say. It’s not like using a gun or a knife or a bludgeon. The guilty party can be somewhere else when it happens—in bed, at the movies, or even in church.”

“Then why, may I ask, would you assume for a moment that Lenore Gregory would have come here tonight, poisoned the sherry while she was here, and then remained very accommodatingly to become a prime suspect?”

“Maybe she didn’t have an opportunity to spike the sherry beforehand.”

“Nonsense. This vessel is crawling with amateur Argonauts, no doubt eating out of cans and sleeping like pigs and wandering about as they please on and below deck. There would certainly have been no lack of opportunity for any of them. Moreover, let us remember that the poison was in the *sherry*. Sherry, I understand, was not Captain Westering’s usual drink. If she

were going to spike anything, as you put it, for the purpose of killing the captain, she would surely have spiked something he would have been more likely to consume.”

“She could have done it *after* it became apparent that he was going to have a glass with her.”

“Then why put it in the decanter? It’s absurd on the face of it. Besides, only one glass had been used.”

“It is, at that, isn’t it? Absurd on the face of it, I mean. But who knows? She’s a kid. Green as grass. No experience with murder. Maybe she just made an unholy botch of the job. Lots of murderers have, you know. On the other hand, maybe not. Maybe she’s a devil of a lot cleverer than she’d have us know. Maybe she wanted us to think just what you *are* thinking.”

“Poppycock! The girl is neither a fool nor a devil. She is a frightened and disillusioned idealist.”

“Well, I’ll hand her one thing. She’s made a good friend in short order.” His sour little eyes gave Miss Withers points for friendship, however misplaced. “Remember, though, that you showed up, according to your own story, at an inopportune time, to say the least. She might have been planning to get out of here in a hurry, but you blocked her escape. She had to improvise.”

“If you imagine that she has the capacity for that kind of improvisation, you are badly mistaken. Anyhow, cicutoxin, the deadly substance in hemlock, does not work that fast. It is fatal, as I recall, in not less than fifteen minutes, and may not be so for much longer. Assuming that it worked in Captain Westering in the minimum time, Lenore Gregory would have had fifteen minutes after ingestion to make her escape. As it was, she was here when I came, and Captain Westering had just died.”

“All right. Let’s concede for the moment that your girl Lenore is nothing more, as you claim, than a dewy-eyed idealist, still wet behind the ears, who is guilty of nothing but idiocy that has got her into a very nasty spot. Where does that leave us?”

“It leaves us, I should say, where we started. That is, with a murdered man on a vessel packed with a passel of suspects from here, there and everywhere, about half of them young women, and all of them living in cramped quarters that would breed intimacies and animosities and all sorts of abnormal relationships, any one of which might explode at any time.”

“I’m sorry I asked. It’s a bloody, unholy mess, that’s what it is. Why can’t anything stay simple, the way it seems when it starts?” He glared at Miss Withers with a venomous flicker in his eyes, as if she were somehow to blame for complicating things. “I suppose I’ll have to question all these kooks. Every last damn one of them. It makes me sick to my belly to think of it.”

“It is, I believe, the accepted procedure in murder investigations to question the suspects. Meanwhile, you might see what can be done about finding the person who slipped off this vessel and disappeared immediately after the murder.”

“What!”

“Now, don’t get belligerent because I haven’t told you sooner. I only found out about him myself a few minutes ago.”

“Is that so? You seem to have a remarkable facility for finding out things. Is it your motherly appearance or do you have a network of spies?”

“I’ve had no experience as a mother, and have no notion of what a motherly appearance might be. Nor do I have a network of spies. I have only one spy. His name is Al Fister, a young neighbor of mine who has been working with me in trying to locate Lenore Gregory. At present he is waiting in the next stateroom, but earlier I left him to keep watch on the dock while I came aboard. It was he who called the police. Before that, just after I left him, he saw someone slip ashore and vanish in the fog. He is certain that this person was a man. He had long hair and was wearing dark glasses.”

“Hippie type. My God, do you have any idea how many hippies infest San Francisco?”

“Approximately as many, I imagine, as infest Los Angeles. What amazes me is how I failed to encounter this person aboard. If he was down here, as I suspect, I must have missed him by seconds, and Lenore Gregory must have missed him by even less, inasmuch as she was in the passage, returning from finding her friend, seconds before I was.”

“In the first place, maybe he wasn’t down here at all. You’re only guessing that he was. In the second, even if he was right here in the stateroom and slipped a lethal dose of hemlock into the sherry, which I doubt, he could have got away without using the passage, just as he could have come without using it. See here.”

Captain Kelso took two lumbering, swift steps and with an enormous foot kicked back the edge of the worn rug, revealing a hatch.

"This leads down into the hold and the bilges," he said. "From the hold there are half a dozen other hatches opening into the cabins, a mess hall, and out on the deck. All of them can easily be opened from above or below. So, you see, Captain Westering was available for murder. And the murderer, if he needed it, had an easy exit from the scene."

"He would have needed to be familiar with the vessel."

"True. This one or one similar."

Miss Withers had been conscious for some seconds of a kind of muted commotion in the passage outside, and it now terminated in a brisk, somehow official, rapping on the door. Captain Kelso barked, and the door swung open, pushed by the hand of a stocky man in conservative, conventional clothes who carried the aura of headquarters about him as surely as he carried, somewhere on his person, his official credentials.

"Here they are, Captain," the man said to Kelso, "the pair of them."

"Good enough, Carney," Captain Kelso said. "Close the door and wait in the passage."

Carney touched the brim of his hat in a pseudo salute and backed out, pulling the door shut behind him, as directed, and leaving on the inside, in his own words, the pair of them. Either of them singly would have been impressive enough; as a pair they were close to overwhelming. Miss Withers, having weathered the Prophet Onofre, had been prepared to believe that no apparition was left aboard to disturb her aplomb, however suddenly, or in whatever place, it should materialize. Now, when she had caught her breath, she conceded her error. The striking pair standing side by side before the closed door made the poor Prophet seem common by comparison, a dull charlatan living in lunacy on a diet of locusts and babbling dreams. The comparison, however, was a comparison of extremes. Whereas the Prophet Onofre was as distorted as an El Greco figure, a vision of obscene ugliness, these two were a double dose of stunning beauty in almost regurgitative quantity.

Amazon, thought Miss Withers, was the word. Or, she amended, perhaps Valkyrie. One of them was about an inch taller than the other, the taller being about six feet flat-footed, and about five or ten pounds heavier, weighing out, at a practiced guess, at about 140 pounds stripped. Not one of the pounds was surplus, nor, so far as Miss Withers was a judge, misplaced.

The magnificent epidermis of both creatures was a dull golden color, seeming to glow softly in the dim light of the cabin, but there the sameness ended and the differences began. The gold motif was carried throughout the taller of the two. Golden skin; long golden hair gathered softly behind in a bun; even, incredibly, long golden eyes with the slightest oriental slant. She wore a flowing robe of pure white from throat to feet, which wore golden sandals, and the robe, which seemed in fact to be composed of several layers of sheer material, clung to the long lines of her superb body as if it were charged with static electricity.

The second, slightly shorter woman was dark. Miss Withers, still reeling mentally, found herself thinking romantic nonsense. If one was morning, she thought, the other was twilight. Long dusky hair gathered softly behind in a bun; even, incredibly, long dusky eyes with the slightest oriental slant. She wore—in sharp contrast to the Greco-oriental-whatnot garb of her companion—a dark red suit of conventional design, almost mannishly severe, with a short skirt in the current fashion.

“I am Aletha Westering,” the golden one said in a clear voice, not so much soprano as tenor. “We have been brought here in the night without explanation. May I ask why?”

9.

IN TRIBUTE TO THE breathless effect of the occasion, a long and gusty sigh broke through the lips of Captain Kelso. His voice, when he spoke, was larded with muted despair. "I'm Captain Kelso, Mrs. Westering. San Francisco police. Homicide Bureau. I'm afraid that I have bad news for you. Perhaps you'd better sit down."

Aletha Westering nodded and sat down in the chair that Kelso indicated. Her companion, whom Miss Withers correctly took to be the sister from Sausalito, assumed, standing, a position to the side and slightly behind the chair. She crossed her bosom with her arms and gave, withal, the impression of an attendant upon a queen. The queen sat with quiet grandeur on her throne, her back straight, her golden head lifted and a little canted, her hands folded in her lap.

"You wish to tell me that Captain Westering is dead," she said serenely.

"As a matter of fact, yes. I must say that you take it very well."

"I am not a demonstrative person. I strive for perfection in an imperfect world. Adversity must be met with serenity."

"How did you know he was dead?"

"It was a fair assumption. Captain Westering was the kind of man who incited misunderstanding and reprisal. He was a fabulous figure, larger than life. He lived by his own law. He was too big for this world."

"Looking at it another way you might say that the world was too small for him and some other person. You have apparently jumped to the conclusion that he was murdered. Why?"

"You said you're from Homicide. Why else should you be here?"

"Of course. As you put it, another fair assumption. Do you know of anyone who might have had reason to kill your husband?"

"I have told you that Captain Westering was a remarkable man. He created turbulence. He was a catalyst. He aroused powerful emotions. Anyone who knew him might have killed him. Anyone, that is, with the capacity to kill at all."

"In my experience that includes most of us, given the right time and place. Your husband, however, died of a lethal dose of poison. Not exactly

the method of a person driven by strong emotion. It suggests a deliberate and calculating killer. I might even say that it suggests a woman.”

“Captain Westering knew many women. They found him fascinating.”

“If you’ll excuse me, let’s take that in reverse. Was Captain Westering susceptible to the women who found him so fascinating?”

“He was a man of strong appetites.”

“Do you know specifically of any women he was involved with?”

“There are seven women on this yacht. All are young. All are attractive. Captain Westering could not abide ugly women. They disturbed him.”

“Maybe the pretty ones disturbed him, too. In a different way. But you evaded my question. I asked if you knew of any women specifically.”

“I can name no names. I do not indulge in jealousy and spite, Captain Kelso. The relationship between Captain Westering and me was an exalted one. Passion is purified by love. If it isn’t, it is not significant.”

“That’s exalted enough for anybody. But what purifies murder? Your husband was murdered, Mrs. Westering. He was poisoned. Don’t you want his murderer found and punished?”

“That’s not my affair. It’s yours.”

“I’m bound to say that you’re pretty casual about it.”

“In the midst of life we are in death. He who doesn’t die today will die tomorrow.”

“I’ll take tomorrow. I’m sure Captain Westering would have preferred it, too. What’s more, it’s against the law to push. The poison that killed Captain Westering was in a decanter of sherry. It could have been put there any time between his death and the time that wine was last drunk from the decanter, which is uncertain. Anyhow, it means that anyone on this vessel had plenty of opportunity. Or anyone in this area, for that matter. The murderer obviously didn’t have to be at the scene of his crime when it took place, and it makes it difficult, if not impossible, for anyone to establish an alibi. Tough luck for me. No easy way to cull this flock of rare birds. You’ve been staying, I understand, with your sister in Sausalito. Just for the record, when were you last aboard this vessel?”

“Today. Or is it now yesterday?”

“Still today. Just barely. Did you come alone?”

“No. Alura brought me.” She turned her golden head and looked back and up at her sister, who reached out a hand and lightly touched for a

moment Aletha Westering's shoulder. "This is Alura."

Miss Withers was conscious of a feeling of delicious completion, a delighted sense of absolute rightness. Aletha and Alura. Golden morning and dusky twilight. She would have been disappointed if the sister's name had turned out to be, say, Sarah or Gertrude. It would have marred the comic-opera character that this absurd affair was beginning, in a grim sort of way, to develop. Not, of course, that she ascribed anything but the sheerest fantasy to the libretto. It was surely the creation of a lunatic imagination.

She had a curiously detached sensation of standing aside in a dream to watch herself dreaming. There had been no Captain Westering, and therefore no Captain Westering had been murdered. There was no Aletha Westering, golden as morning, with a sister Alura as dusky as twilight. There was no runaway girl named Lenore and no UCLA drop-out named Aloysius. Maybe there wasn't even a Hildegard Withers. It was all a florid nightmare of psychedelic colors created in her heated mind by an indiscreet pepperoni pizza eaten at midnight.

But running concurrently through her mind with the sensation of unreality was a very real conviction based soundly on long experience with grade-school delinquents and various homicidal personalities. It was the conviction that the golden Aletha, whatever her real name and wherever she came from and whatever she had done or would do, was the most superbly gifted liar on earth. As pedagogue and sleuth, Miss Withers had smelled too many liars to be deceived. She smelled one now.

"Did you see your husband while you were here?" Captain Kelso asked.

"Yes. Certainly. That's why I came."

"In this stateroom?"

"Here and on deck. He went up with me when I left."

"Was your sister with you all the time?"

"No. She waited for me in the lounge on deck. She wasn't there when Captain Westering and I came up, and so we waited together on deck for a few minutes until she appeared. If you are trying to discover if I had opportunity to put poison in the decanter, Captain, I did. I could have done it easily without detection several times."

"Well, I can't see that you've incriminated yourself by admitting it. So could fifteen or twenty others. What did you talk with your husband about?"

Anything special?"

"Numerous difficulties have developed in connection with our projected voyage. We discussed them."

"What kinds of difficulties?"

"Mostly financial. Captain Westering and I and Alura were to bear most of the expense, but we were dependent in part on the contributions of our amateur crew. Most of them have very little to contribute, and some of them nothing at all except their work and good faith. Besides financial problems, there has been difficulty in securing experienced personnel to command the others. Two or three, plus Captain Westering, would have been sufficient, but no one has been eager to commit himself to our cause. To be candid, we discussed the advisability of calling the voyage off."

"What about the contributions? Would you have been able to refund them?"

"I'm afraid not. Not, at any rate, in full."

"Was this ever discussed with anyone else? Did any of the amateur crew suspect it, I mean? People committed to a cause can kick up pretty nasty if they smell fraud."

"It was not a question of fraud. Anyhow, no one suspected. As a matter of fact, Captain Westering and I were unalterably opposed to any change of plans. We discussed the possibility to appease Alura."

"Exactly what was the nature of this proposed voyage?"

"Ostensibly, we were making a philosophical-religious pilgrimage to India and Japan. Actually, it was to be a peace mission to Hanoi. It was essential, of course, to keep the true nature and destination of the voyage a secret. Now, however, the voyage will be abandoned and there is no further purpose in secrecy."

"Holy God!" Captain Kelso stared at Aletha Westering with an expression of open-mouthed idiocy, exploring his naked head with the fingers of one hand in a massaging motion, as if he were searching for soft spots. "Do you mean to tell me in all seriousness that you were going to try to sail this tub halfway around the world and into hostile waters with a crew of wild-eyed amateurs who don't know fore from aft or port from lee?"

"Miracles are performed by innocents, Captain."

"Maybe. But ignorance and innocence aren't necessarily the same thing. By all that's sacred, I swear there hasn't been anything so absolutely crazy, planned or performed, since ... since ..."

Captain Kelso, unable to think of anything so crazy, lapsed into sputtering silence, leaving Miss Withers to complete his sentence silently. Since the Children's Crusade, she thought. And that had ended as this would have ended, over seven centuries later, in the destruction of the innocents. She stared at Aletha Westering with something like awe. Aletha sat unperturbed and impervious, her head lifted and canted, perhaps turned toward the remote voice of God, her hands folded in her lap.

Miss Withers, heretofore, had been restraining herself with a herculean effort. Several times in the course of the exchange between Captain Kelso and Aletha Westering, she had opened her mouth to butt in, but each time, not having tested the extent of Captain Kelso's tolerance of amateur assistance, she had submitted to second thoughts and quietly closed it again. It was a traumatic experience. Sustained indefinitely, it would surely have resulted in some kind of neurosis. Still, she had bided her time in dread of Kelso's irascibility, not wishing to be banned from the scene as well as the action, until her time was opportune. Now, with the detective reduced through unintelligible sputtering into inept silence, she decided that it was. Risking the chance of being bounced, she butted in.

"Mrs. Westering," she said, "do you know a girl named Lenore Gregory?"

The golden head of Aletha and the naked head of Kelso turned slowly toward her in unison. The little eyes of the latter, though still slightly wild, expressed no belligerence at her presumption, far from it, and in fact seemed to offer dumb thanks for the chance to take a break and recoup. In the golden slanted eyes of the former there was a momentary flicker of surprise, as though the rather conspicuous figure of the spinster had until then gone completely unnoticed, and presented, now that it had introduced itself, an appearance as striking, albeit inversely, as Aletha's own.

"Of course," Aletha said. "She is one of our most dedicated pilgrims. A lovely child."

"So she is. She is also, I understand, a comparatively heavy investor in this venture. Is that so?"

"It is. Comparatively. She is blessed with a greater share of the world's goods than most of our poor pilgrims."

"She has a wealthy father, if that's what you mean. He is, incidentally, most anxious to get in contact with her. If you're curious, that's why I'm here."

“I wondered.” Miss Withers, watching intently, wondered if the serenity of the golden eyes was disturbed for an instant by a glitter of icy appraisal. “There is always a gap between the generations. What father understands his child?”

“Most of them, I think, keep trying.”

“It’s distressing that you found her in such unfortunate circumstances.”

“Her circumstances may be more unfortunate than you know. She was with your husband when he died. Tell me, what was the personal relationship between Captain Westering and Lenore Gregory?”

“He was greatly attracted to her. There was an affinity. He admired her spirit and her intellect.”

“She has other admirable qualities. Are you sure his admiration was limited to her spirit and her intellect?”

“Captain Westering was a vital and questing man, as I’ve tried to indicate. He lived in his own world, by his own code. One doesn’t expect such a man to observe conventions.”

“What I’m getting at is this. Do you know of anyone aboard this vessel who hated Lenore Gregory because of her position as the captain’s favorite, whatever that position entailed exactly?”

“No. Not I, certainly, if that’s what you’re suggesting. Why do you ask?” Again Miss Withers wondered if there was a flash of appraisal in the golden eyes. “It was not the girl who died. It was Captain Westering.”

Captain Kelso shifted his considerable bulk with an ominous grunt, which Miss Withers interpreted as a warning that she was flirting with an indiscretion. It gave her, indeed, a solid sense of satisfaction. It meant, after all, that he was taking seriously her contention that the murderer had made the egregious error of killing the wrong person, and that he didn’t for reasons of tactical advantage, want that knowledge, or possibility, prematurely revealed. It was time, she wisely decided, to withdraw.

“That’s true, isn’t it?” she said meekly.

She subsided with an ineffectual flutter of hands, a monstrously deceptive gesture of ineptitude, and Captain Kelso resumed command. This time his attention was directed to the woman standing by, the twilight sister at the shoulder of morning.

“You are Mrs. Westering’s sister Alura,” he said. “I don’t remember that your last name was mentioned.”

“It’s O’Higgins.”

Her voice, in contrast to her sister's, was a throaty alto, filled with shadows. Miss Withers, who would have given odds, was delighted. The casting continued perfect.

"You live in Sausalito?"

"Yes."

"Your sister has been staying with you?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"Since she arrived in San Francisco with her husband."

"You are married?"

"No. I've never been."

"You heard what your sister said about your movements earlier today. Do you have anything to alter or add?"

"No. Nothing."

"She said you waited for her in the lounge on deck. When she came up later with the captain, you weren't there. Where did you go?"

"I went to see if a friend of mine was on board. I couldn't find her, but I wasn't surprised. She doesn't stay here on the yacht."

"What is your friend's name?"

"Leslie Fitzgerald. She's an artist with a studio in San Francisco. I own a restaurant in Sausalito, and she did a couple of murals for me. That's how I became acquainted with her."

"Were you going on this so-called peace mission?"

"No. To please Aletha, I agreed to give it limited support. Reluctantly. In my opinion, it was a wild and hazardous venture."

"That's putting it mildly. Do you share your sister's opinion of Captain Westering?"

"Captain Westering was an unusual man. I don't care to elaborate on that."

"All right." Captain Kelso slapped a huge palm against a thigh with a sharp smack. Jerking around, he lumbered away three paces and, turning again, back two. "That's all. That's enough. The night's getting away, and I've still got the fascinating prospect of going through this shipload of maniacs. Mrs. Westering, you and your sister are free to go back to Sausalito. I advise you to stay there until we contact you. Captain Westering's body will be released to you as soon as possible."

He moved to the door, opened it, and stuck his head into the passage. He growled briefly at the detective there and drew his head back into the room.

"The policeman who brought you here will drive you home," he said. "Good night."

Aletha Westering nodded but did not speak. Alura O'Higgins neither nodded nor spoke. The former stood up, shook out her clinging white robe, and walked regally past Captain Kelso, followed by the latter. Captain Kelso closed the door and leaned against it and closed his eyes. His lips moved. Miss Withers could not tell if he was cursing or praying.

"That woman," said Miss Withers, "not only *tells* lies, she *lives* lies. She deludes herself and believes her delusions."

"Sure." Captain Kelso opened his fermented little eyes and released a malevolent look at Miss Withers. "She's a phony. The world's full of them. This tub is crawling with them."

"You're mistaken. I didn't say she's a phony. I said she's deluded. She believes at any given time whatever she wishes to believe. Such women are dangerous."

"If you ask me, *all* women are dangerous. I'm beginning to believe that even *you* are dangerous. You show up like a spook at the scene of a murder, and the next thing I know, I'm letting you act like a detective."

His little eyes were still malevolent, but actually, if the truth were known, he was beginning already to develop a certain affection for the angular old busybody. Once, a thousand years ago, he had been a small boy with red ringlets, and in that medieval period he had had a mother whom he sometimes remembered. Mr. Kelso, husband and father, having fallen off Pier 36 and drowned while drunk, she had become a seamstress in order to survive. Hardship and worry had made her short of temper and shorter of forbearance. He could still feel for his sins the excruciating rap of her thimble on his skull. Miss Withers, for some obscure reason, conjured up visions of this faded, benevolent tartar.

"Consider her behavior relative to Captain Westering," Miss Withers said, deliberately ignoring the digression. "Here is a man who, according to her, exercises a fatal charm over the ladies, and yet she goes off to live in Sausalito with her sister, leaving him to his own devices with a passel of attractive young women, all of them apparently romantic and susceptible,

under conditions that literally impose extraordinary intimacy. I wonder why.”

“You heard her.” Captain Kelso’s voice had the effect of a belch, as though something had soured on his stomach. “What sensible wife would get upset over a little hocus-pocus in the hay? It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t purified by love.”

10.

AFTERWARD, MISS WITHERS ALWAYS remembered the action of the rest of that night, or rather of the long hours of the morning creeping toward dawn, as a kind of mad drama written by a schizophrenic playwright at which she and Captain Kelso were, somehow, both spectators and players, and in which, otherwise, of a large cast, never more than one player at a time was on the stage. The effect was disturbing. It was of the insubstantial stuff of nightmares. Miss Withers had never smoked pot or taken LSD or any of the other so-called psychedelic drugs which were supposed to enlarge the mind and set it free, but she wondered, if she were to do so, if the effect would not be comparable. Maybe it was because her mind, in those thin and haunting hours when the force of life sinks low and death stands by, had slipped its discipline in a fantasy of mad antics and impressions. Maybe it was because, after a day of almost endless hours in which she had traveled far and done much, she was simply giddy from sheer exhaustion. Whatever the truth, it was a night she remembered as a weird dream in swirling vivid colors. A night in which, in spite of incontrovertible evidence of reality, she could hardly believe.

The players entered one by one from the wings, actually from the two small staterooms into which they had long ago been herded. Entrance cues were fed to them by a heavy-eyed detective in the passage who kept himself awake by imagining the incredible luxury of being asleep. Of the cast of players waiting, two made no appearance. One was Lenore, because she had been thoroughly grilled by Captain Kelso at the start of the show, and the other was Aloysius Fister, because it was satisfactorily established that he, like Miss Withers, was really no more than a kibitzer who had been embroiled simply by accidentally making the scene.

The action was started by the Prophet Onofre, possibly on the theory that it is best to face the worst first. Prodded from the rear by the detective, he loped into the captain's cabin with his scanty white robe flapping around his thin shanks midway between knees and ankles. His baleful glare fixed instantly upon the face of Miss Withers, who clearly excited an extraordinary animosity, and his lips moved in muttered imprecations. His fury and outrage seemed to charge him with an electrical force that made

his grizzled, greasy beard and the long hair of his head, ordinarily limp, stand out in all directions and quiver like the antennas of some monstrous myriopod.

Kelso: What is your name?

Onofre: I am the Prophet Onofre.

Kelso: What is your *real* name?

Onofre: My real name is the Prophet Onofre. I have no other.

Kelso: Did you ever have another?

Onofre: Before my rebirth to grace, I used another name.

Kelso: What was it?

Onofre: In those days of iniquity I was called Sylvester Snyder.

Kelso: All right, Sylvester, where do you live?

Onofre: I live where I am, wherever that may be.

Kelso: No permanent address. What do you do?

Onofre: I bring light into darkness. I proselyte in the wilderness among the children of night.

Kelso: No occupation. Why are you on this vessel?

Onofre: I came in the beginning of a pilgrimage. I heard the call of distant lands, the voices of ancient prophets.

Kelso: Come off it. What put you onto this screwball voyage?

Onofre: There was a notice in the San Francisco *Chronicle*.

Kelso: That's more like it. I understand this was to be a cooperative venture. Everyone to share expenses and work, I mean. What have you contributed?

Onofre: I would have led the pilgrims safely to distant ports over angry waters. I live in grace. I have been touched by the spirit.

Kelso: What spirit?

Onofre: The spirit of light. The spirit of love. The spirit that lives in the hearts of the flower children.

Kelso: You're the prophet of the flower children?

Onofre: I have spoken.

Kelso: Self-appointed?

Onofre: I have been touched by the spirit. I have heard the voice.

Kelso: All right, Sylvester. Let's get back to contributions. Have you laid out any hard cash?

Onofre: I am possessed of none of this world's goods, except the poor rags that cover my nakedness. My wealth is of the spirit.

Kelso: I see. A free-loader.

Onofre: I am fed by those who love me. I am sheltered by those who follow after truth in my footsteps.

Kelso (harshly, clearly sick of the game): Captain Westering died here in this cabin tonight. He died, as nearly as we can set the time, about nine o'clock or a little before. Where were you at that time?

Onofre: I was pacing the docks with a heavy heart and a troubled mind. I had walked in the bitterness of my trial all the way along the Embarcadero to the vicinity of the old Barbary Coast and back again. I suppose, at nine o'clock, I was again approaching this vessel, but still some distance away.

Kelso: What was troubling you?

Onofre: I was troubled by the character and true nature of the man I had taken in good faith to be my captain on this pilgrimage.

Kelso: Captain Westering? What about him?

Onofre: He was a libertine, a monstrous fraud, a godless wretch.

Kelso: What made you think so?

Onofre: I am attuned to evil by the spirit of good. I was filled with fury and despair by the things that happened aboard this vessel.

Kelso: What things?

Onofre: I will speak no further of evil. Already I have spoken too much. Where it grows, I will root it out.

Kelso: As the citizens around Haight-Ashbury would say, rooting out evil seems to be your thing.

Onofre: It is my mission. Evil is insidious. It infiltrates the society of innocents in the guise of good. Even my poor flower children are tempted on all sides by the devils of evil. I have been called to destroy them.

Kelso: Brother, you've got a job! But you're talking now like an Old Testament eye-and-toothier. What happened to love and light? Where's your other cheek?

Onofre: I have been given special dispensation. I am under holy orders to root out evil by any method, wherever it appears.

Kelso: Are you, now! Did you have holy orders, for instance, to root out Captain Westering? The term's appropriate, come to think of it. Did

you come across some water hemlock somewhere when you were living, maybe, on roots and berries in the wilderness?

Onofre: I know nothing of hemlock. I did not kill Captain Westering.

Kelso: You didn't bleed a few hemlock roots and slip the juice in the captain's sherry?

Onofre: I did no harm to Captain Westering. I did not lift my hand against him. I returned to remonstrate with him, that's all, and found him dead. Let the woman speak! (Pointing at Miss Withers with dramatic sternness, very much as Uncle Sam pointed from posters at shoe clerks during the Kaiser's war in Miss Withers' youth.) She was bending over his body when I came! (Not quite true, inasmuch as Miss Withers had been, in fact, standing a pace or two away from the body with her back to it.)

Kelso (rubbing his bald scalp with his wad of handkerchief): You could have poisoned the sherry any time before. That's the hell of this mess. But let it go for now. That's all, Sylvester. You can go back to detention.

Captain Kelso stopped rubbing his scalp and stowed the wad in a pocket of his limp jacket. "I've got to step this up," he said glumly, "or we'll be here from now on. What did you think of Sylvester as a starter?"

"He is," said Miss Withers, "as mad as the Hatter or the most consummate fraud since Cagliostro. Possibly he is some of both."

"With maybe a little Borgia thrown in for good measure. What do you think of him as a suspect?"

"Fanatics who follow the dictates of God are dangerous. They are always right, always justified in any atrocity, and they always have, besides, someone to pass the buck to if they are caught."

Captain Kelso, who was secretly a modest and uncertain man, never quite sure of anything, let alone right and wrong, stared at the floor with a sour expression that was far from an accurate reflection of his true feeling. The more he was around this old sister, the more he liked her. No wonder she had been able to gull the whole damn Homicide Bureau of the New York Police Department. He tried to think of a left-handed amenity that wouldn't reveal too much of what he was thinking, but before he could come up with anything, the door opened again, and the ex-policeman was ushered in. He stood quietly in front of Captain Kelso, who was seated at a

small table with his notebook spread open before him, and Miss Withers was suddenly aware of deadly tension in the cabin. It was as if, she thought, the air was suddenly saturated with an odorless and sensitive gas that would explode in a blinding flash at the slightest disturbance—a raised voice, an abrupt gesture, a heated word.

Kelso (his voice flat, almost a monotone, clearly under rigid control):

Nathan Silversmith, spy, pervert, sadist, turncoat.

Silversmith: I see that you remember me, Captain.

Kelso: How could I forget you? But never mind that. What are you doing on this tub? You a flower child these days?

Silversmith: I've seen the light, Captain. I've been touched by grace.

The Prophet Onofre has shown me the error of my ways.

Kelso: Like hell. Who are you spying for now? Who planted you in this flock of doves?

Silversmith: Captain, you hurt me. I seem to smell the faint odor of prejudice.

Kelso: Before we're through with this business you may be smelling cyanide.

Silversmith: For killing the good captain? I hate to disappoint you, but you're down the wrong road. Why should I kill him?

Kelso: Why not? Just a bad habit, maybe. You killed your wife, didn't you?

Silversmith (quietly venomous): Cool it, Captain. That's criminal slander.

Kelso: Sue me. Before you do, though, you can answer a few questions.

Where were you when Captain Westering died?

Silversmith: When did he die?

Kelso: Nine. Thereabouts.

Silversmith: I was ashore, smelling the oyster pots.

Kelso: Where ashore?

Silversmith: At Fisherman's Wharf. In a bar on the Embarcadero.

Kelso: What time did you get back?

Silversmith: Early. Must have been shortly after the good captain's passing. You and your heat hadn't made the scene yet.

Kelso: Did you see anyone on the dock as you approached?

Silversmith: There was someone standing there, like he was waiting for someone or snooping. The fog was heavy. I couldn't see him very well.

Kelso: I know about him. Anyone else? Someone moving away?

Silversmith: No one else.

Kelso: A hippie? Long hair, dark glasses, in a hurry.

Silversmith: You're bugging me, Captain. I told you no. No one.

Kelso: What did you do when you came aboard?

Silversmith: There were three chicks and a couple of cats in the stateroom at the fore end of the passage. Just having a quiet ball to pass the time. Listening to that long Texas cat sing folk songs. I invited myself in. Crashed the pad, as they say in the Hashberry.

Kelso: Did you see or hear anything unusual while you were there?

Silversmith (looking at Miss Withers): Not until this old chick suddenly materialized in the doorway and told us that murder had been done and the cops called.

Kelso: You were a cop once. A rogue cop, maybe, but still a cop.

You've been living here in a litter of kooks long enough to have a notion or two. Who do you think poisoned Captain Westering?

Silversmith: Sorry, Captain. Get your own notions.

Kelso: I've already told you who my favorite suspect is. Or didn't you get the point? You. Nathan Silversmith. Now tell me yours.

Silversmith: You wouldn't try to frame me, would you, Captain?

Kelso: Frame? Who said anything about frame? It's possible, of course, that I might be fooled by circumstantial evidence or something like that. Anybody can make an honest mistake.

Silversmith: Are you sure Westering was murdered at all? Maybe he died of botulism. God knows we've been eating enough garbage out of cans. After all, this is supposed to be a gathering, as you said, of doves. Sweetness and light. Peace, brother, peace. Ho Chi Minh, here we come, bearing the olive branch. Who here would do violence to his brother? Even a brother with the faults of a Westering? At least, without leaving a flower on his chest?

Kelso: I think I may puke. Get out of here, Silversmith. And don't go off smelling any more oyster pots until I say you can.

Silversmith got. Captain Kelso pushed away from the table, heaved to his feet and lumbered across to a porthole, where he inhaled a chestful of wet air scented with sea-salt and oyster pots and all the other enchanting smells of San Francisco at the shag end of a long night.

“When you’ve had enough,” said Miss Withers, “I’d like a turn.”

Captain Kelso, pulling his nose out of the porthole, turned and tried a sympathetic grin, but it didn’t come off. His face and scalp were the greenish color of bile, and the bitter taste of bile was plainly in his mouth. He looked sick. Returning to the table, he sat down again.

“I know Mr. Silversmith from time past,” he said. “Maybe you drew that conclusion.”

“And until you see into his eyes,” Miss Withers said, “he looks such an ordinary, pleasant young man.”

“He’s neither ordinary nor pleasant nor very young. How old would you say? Thirty? He’s nearer forty.”

“You accused him of killing his wife. Why?”

“Because he killed her, that’s why.”

“Then why is he free?”

“No proof. Just the knowledge that he did. He’s a clever lad, our Nathan Silversmith. A smooth operator. After the Korean War he turned up in San Francisco with a ruptured duck. Or were ruptured ducks only after World War II? I don’t remember. Anyhow, an honorable discharge. He’d been in the Military Police, and he had a very bright idea in his head. He conned someone into putting him on the force as an undercover cop. The beats were infesting North Beach then. What he’d do, he’d disguise himself with a wig and dark glasses and appropriate rags and crash their pads. He even learned to fake a blast. Pretend to get high, I mean, on pot or some drug. Ostensibly, the idea was to get leads on the mainliners and the pushers of the hard stuff, heroin and such, but actually nothing ever came of it except the arrest of a lot of relatively harmless characters whose real crime was not liking the rest of us and showing their dislike by dressing different and living different.

“Well, most of the time I don’t like the rest of us much, either. But let that go. Silversmith was an undercover cop. An informer. Trouble with him was, he was never quite sure which side he was on. If he’d been in international espionage, he’d have been what’s known as a double agent. What’s more, he was a sweet little sadist. He had the moral convictions of

an alley cat. None at all. He didn't really care a damn what the beats did, but he got his kicks from seeing them raided and harassed and knocked around by the more enthusiastic boys on the raiding squads. As a matter of fact, he found some of their habits so satisfying that he began to adopt them. For example, he discovered that it was a lot easier to have a blast than to fake one. There were other things, but let them go too. He didn't last long. He was dropped from the force. No formal charges. Just dropped.

"Meanwhile, somewhere along the way, he'd picked up a girl. He married her. She was a pretty kid, about twenty when he married her, with nice eyes and long brown hair that she let hang free. You know the kind. They're all over the place. Holding love-ins in the Panhandle and sit-ins at Berkeley. Bucking the Establishment, whatever that is, however they can. There wasn't any harm in her, and what's more important to me, as a member of the so-called Establishment, no harm had *come* to her. Not until she married Nathan Silversmith, that is. I don't know what he taught her. I'd rather not. Anyhow, she got onto acid. LSD. You know how LSD affects you? Sister, it sets you free. It makes you a swinging, soaring cat, ten feet tall. It makes you want to fly. That's what it did, one night, to young Mrs. Silversmith. So he says. Mr. Silversmith says. They were standing on a little balcony outside their pad, three floors above the pavement, and all of a sudden she said, he says, "Nathan, I'm going to fly," and over she went like a swinging bird. A little later we scraped her off the pavement and carried her away in a basket.

"Well, you get bruised, taking a header three floors onto the pavement. Bruises and abrasions. But you don't get them in all the places she had hers. She'd been beat up, I know that. She could have been tossed off that balcony, and she was. I know that, too. But how could I prove it from a few extra bruises? Besides, she was only a disinherited kid peddling flowers in a psychedelic dream. No great loss."

All this while, for the duration of Captain Kelso's bitter monologue, Miss Withers, like a good therapist, had sat quietly and listened. Now that it was over, catharsis complete, she was quiet a few moments longer before she spoke.

"I wonder," she said, "what's he's doing here? Surely a man like that has no interest in oriental philosophy or world peace or anything of the sort."

“Who knows? God and the devil and Nathan Silversmith. Maybe, like I said, he was planted, though I doubt it. Maybe he’s just sick of San Francisco, and just wanted to take a long ride to anywhere. He’s that kind of crumb. He doesn’t give a damn which side of anything he’s on, the law or anything else, just so long as he gets out of it the kind of kicks he needs. A long voyage like this was supposed to be, thousands of miles on an old tub in what showed promise of being a sort of marathon love-in, must have offered a lot of pleasant prospects to sweet Nathan.”

11.

THE LONG HOURS OF inquiry diminished slowly in a fantasy of distortions brewed in minds made erratic by corrosive fatigue. Captain Kelso made methodical notes in a limp-backed book that threatened near the end to run out of clean pages. Miss Withers, who had nothing at hand to write with or in, watched and listened and tried to give in her retentive memory some kind of sane order to a welter of testimony. In her effort to accomplish this almost impossible task, a couple of things became clear as the parade of witnesses passed in and out of the late captain's stateroom. In the first place, this incredible crew had been assembled inside the Golden Gate by the simple, seductive method of advertisements, written by Captain Westering and by him placed in selected metropolitan newspapers across the country. The remarkably effective grapevine of an active underworld had done the rest. In the second place, after a period of stagnation and frustration, prolonged by lingering hope and sustained by canned beans, the good yacht *Karma* had become a pustule of festered relationships. And the pathogen was Captain Westering himself.

Miss Withers, in this confusing performance of extraordinary characters, could never afterward remember the *dramatis personae* in order of appearance, but she could summon clearly the vision of each, neatly tagged and classified in her mind, just as she could still summon the visions of urchins, now aged or dead, who had done tedious time in her classroom in years past.

Bernadine Toller. "My friends call me Bernie." Cocktail waitress from Denver, Colorado. A friend had told her about Captain Westering's call for Argonauts, and she had taken her savings of tips out of the bottom dresser drawer and headed for San Francisco. Sort of impetuous. She did things like that. Sort of impetuous. Captain Westering was cool, but cool. He was simply out of sight. She and the captain had had a thing going; it was something you could just feel, like goose pimples. But that was before Lenore Gregory made the scene. Captain Westering was hung up on the Gregory chick. She had the captain shucked. Bernadine Toller looked at Miss Withers with chilling empty eyes and smiled a terrible empty smile. Her voice was frail and brittle, with a quality of little-girl demureness that

was somehow as shocking as a smirk on the face of a corpse. About her was an aura of nihilism all the more dreadful for being dressed in a pinafore.

Delmar Faulkenstein. Folk singer. Originally from Dallas, Texas, but traveled around. Made the minor spots, the coffee shops and whatnot, where there was enough bread to hire one voice and a guitar. It wasn't much, but it was his trip. He had been across the bridge in Sausalito when he heard about Captain Westering's projected voyage. It sounded like a gas, and here he came. As it was, the whole thing had turned out to be a bummer. Not that it was any big surprise. The captain was a phony. The captain was born for killing. He flipped over the chicks, that was his trouble. And vice versa, to make it worse. Things got loose on a little tub like this. Everyone practically in everyone's lap, so to speak. He wasn't the heat, not Delmar Faulkenstein, but he'd know where to look for the captain's killer if he was. He shook his lank hair, shaped six feet of ample curves with his hands, and seemed to go suddenly to sleep on his feet with his eyes open.

Corrine Leicester. The long-legged dancer from Los Angeles who had shared the stateroom next door with Miss Withers during detention. She did bits in movies, on TV. She had been on the verge of her big break, she was sure of it. She had caught the attention in certain quarters of certain people. Powerful people. But then she had heard from a certain TV writer of Captain Westering's pilgrimage. She had to come. She simply couldn't help herself. She felt very strongly about the war, all the killing and everything, and it was like a call she couldn't deny, no matter what sacrifice she had to make. The TV writer had felt the same way. About war and peace and all. They had often discussed it with each other.

Why hadn't the TV writer, if he felt so strongly, volunteered for the pilgrimage himself? Well, he had. He was waiting with the others this very minute. They had come up together from Los Angeles. His name was Adrian Hogue. What had been the nature of the relationship between her and Mr. Hogue? They had been good friends. Intimate friends? Well, very good friends. What had been her opinion of Captain Westering? Captain Westering had been a rare man. He had something magnetic about him. He drew one irresistibly. Had he, for instance, irresistibly drawn Corrine Leicester? She had been fascinated by him. She wouldn't deny it. What had been the reaction of Mr. Hogue to this? He hadn't liked it, of course. In fact, he'd been quite difficult.

Did Miss Leicester know Miss Gregory? Yes, of course. Everyone aboard knew everyone else. What did she think of Miss Gregory? To tell the truth, she hardly thought of her at all. Miss Gregory was, she supposed, attractive in a colorless sort of way. But immature. Quite naïve, really. Captain Westering had recognized this. He had tried to be kind to her. Had paid her little extra attentions, and so on. Miss Leicester, thought Miss Withers, had suddenly closed up. She was exercising control and dealing in understatement. She posed gracefully in her leotards, her long legs dominant. They were, in spite of the muscle knots in the calves, very nice legs.

Adrian Hogue. A handsome man, in his late twenties, with soft dark eyes and black hair that had grown below his collar on the back of his neck and in long sideburns in front of his ears. He supported the statements of Corrine Leicester. They had come up from Los Angeles together. What was his opinion of Captain Westering? On this point, the opinions of Mr. Hogue and his *very* good friend differed radically. Westering was a fraud. He didn't give a damn about world peace or philosophical concepts or anything at all except excitement and women, which were, when you stopped to think about it, often the same thing. He was a poseur, a dated swashbuckler à la Errol Flynn. In brief, he was a straw man, a glamorous dummy who fronted for his wife. Aletha Westering! Now, there was a woman! It was easy enough to see that she held her absurd husband in contempt, whatever she might pretend to the contrary. Look at the way she went off to live with her sister in Sausalito and left him at liberty to prowl at will among a load of gullible women who couldn't tell the difference between a shallow pretender and a real man.

Rebecca Welch. Former student at Ohio State University. Home in Cleveland. Another runaway, no doubt, with agonized parents somewhere in a sweat behind her. About nineteen. Not over twenty at most. Long blond hair, straight as a string, hanging free. Blue eyes haunted by the shadow of regret and fear. Recent graduate from the teeny-bopper class. Now rudely disenchanted, Miss Withers thought. Home is where the heart is, and her heart was home. She was the friend Lenore Gregory had gone to find just before Captain Westering began to die in his stateroom. Lenore had found her being sick in the crew's quarters. Rebecca verified this fiercely, as though it were far more important than it was. She was obviously attached to Lenore, in whom she saw one of her own kind, and who was now in need

of help. Would the attachment prompt her to lie for her friend? Miss Withers thought it would, but was sure it hadn't.

Harriet Owens. Diminutive poet from Kansas City, Missouri. About ninety pounds of fierce intensity in a five-foot package. Dark brown hair cut shorter than most of the men's. There was something almost exhausting about her, an effect of indiscriminate total commitment that would too often be wasted on ends that weren't worth it, a kind of cannibalistic hunger feeding on her own heart. Miss Withers thought of another poet famous in her salad days. *I burn my candle at both ends* ... Harriet Owens, like Corrine Leicester, had joined the amateur crew of motley Argonauts in the company of a man, Carey Singer, a young assistant professor of Russian Literature at Wichita University, in Kansas. He and she had done graduate work together at the University of Kansas in Lawrence. Seduced by Captain Westering's siren call, he had jumped his contract and headed west, detouring far enough from his way to collect Harriet, a pushover for a pilgrimage so exalted. It was evident now, however, that Carey Singer felt he had given up quite a lot for next to nothing. His bitterness showed. Intense, diminutive Harriet, Miss Withers concluded, had also been vulnerable to Captain Westering's magnetism.

Evelyn Talbot. A secretary from Chicago. Tall and slender. Dark red hair. Apparently square, but definitely not one of the uptight people. That is, she worked for her bread in the Establishment, but she played with the cool ones off-hours. A shuttle-chick. Back and forth between worlds. She'd joined the Argonauts for kicks more than anything else. It looked like being a gas. It was a kick in the teeth for the lousy Establishment. Besides, it was a chance to split from a dull gig, taking dictation from a fat centipede in a loan office. It was too bad everything had gone to hell. After this current scene was over, she supposed she'd have to cop out. Back to the Game. Her bread was gone, and a girl had to live.

Carl Cramer. From across the bay. Berkeley drop-out. Almost colorless hair that was skinned back and braided in a queue. Sharp nose, sharp eyes, sharp chin. He had a predatory look about him. Miss Withers, an old Stevenson buff, was put in mind of Israel Hands. He seemed far out of character as a dove on a vessel sailing under an olive branch. What was his opinion of Captain Westering? Carl Cramer bared his teeth in a knowing, wolfish grin, old and wicked beyond his years, and said nothing. What had he studied at Berkeley before joining the drop-outs? All about God's little

plants. Botany, that is. The Burbank thing. Captain Kelso, expressionless, made a note and drew a heavy line under it.

Simon Lefevre. Psychedelic shopkeeper from Haight Street. Whatever a psychedelic shop is. Uncertain mustache. Scant goatee. Horn-rimmed glasses with very thick lenses. Every word like in a dream. Every gesture like in a trance. Living in peace in his private nitty-gritty. Reality, man. The truth below the surface. Cool, man, cool. It was too bad about the captain, but nothing could be done about it. It was nothing, you understand, to get uptight about. Captain Kelso was acquainted with Lefevre. He made notes and looked resigned.

Leslie Fitzgerald. Last but surely not least. She was wearing a simple dress that hung straight from her shoulders like a smock and ended inches above her knees. She carried her dark head with an air of pride and assurance, and her thin face, although now drawn with fatigue, was lovely and composed. She was an artist with a studio in San Francisco, and Miss Withers would have given odds, not knowing precisely why, that she was an artist with genuine talent who worked hard at her art. She had not been living aboard the yacht with the others. Until sailing date, which had kept looking more and more remote, she was living and working as before in her studio. It was simply bad luck that she had come aboard tonight. She had learned of the voyage from Alura O'Higgins, the captain's sister-in-law. Alura was the proprietor of a successful restaurant in Sausalito, and had commissioned Leslie Fitzgerald to do a couple of murals for its walls. They had become friends at the time, and the friendship had survived. Leslie had no idea who might have killed Captain Westering, or who, for that matter, would have wanted to.

Leslie Fitzgerald was dismissed, and Captain Kelso leaned back in his chair with a gusty sigh and gave his naked scalp a vigorous Dutch rub. He closed his eyes, either for forty winks or to review in darkness the events of the last hours. His interrogation, Miss Withers summarized, had elicited in every case, beside a potpourri of personal data, the answers to four pertinent questions.

At the time of Westering's death, according to their own testimony, Bernadine Toller, Evelyn Talbot, Corrine Leicester and Adrian Hogue had been in the stateroom down the passage listening to the singing of Delmar Faulkenstein. They were joined by Nathan Silversmith after his return from the Embarcadero. The Prophet Onofre had been prowling the docks,

muttering imprecations in his beard. Rebecca Welch had been in the crew's quarters. Carl Cramer had been there also, asleep on a bunk. Harriet Owens and Carey Singer had been walking together in the vicinity, they weren't quite sure where, after a reprieve from beans at the Fishermen's Grotto on Fisherman's Wharf. Simon Lefevre had been on a visit to his shop, padlocked for the indefinite duration of the pilgrimage, and had returned just before the arrival of the police. Leslie Fitzgerald had come aboard, in fact, after the police had arrived. Not that the presence of anyone aboard at the time of death was crucial. As Captain Kelso kept repeating, the poison could have been put into the decanter at any time earlier. That was the difficulty from the police point of view. And the advantage from the murderer's.

Despite the fact that Captain Westering must have done considerable groaning and threshing about in the process of dying, no one admitted to hearing him.

No one had seen a stranger aboard fitting the description of the hippie-type that Al Fister had seen come ashore.

No one admitted to seeing any such person at any time prior to that night.

Captain Kelso sighed again, a low and windy sound between a rumble and a groan, and heaved himself to his feet. He lumbered to the porthole and stood there with his back turned, staring out into the pale light of a day beginning after one that had never ended. Not, at any rate, for Captain Kelso. After a minute or two he turned back, knuckled his scalp, and stared with a horrible grin at the weary spinster. *A tough old bird*, he thought. *Leather and bone and guts.*

"That's the lot," he said. "That's the whole nest of cuckoos. Now we'll have to check out those backgrounds. Every damn one of them."

"Such a waste," said Miss Withers, "when only one is guilty."

"That's police work. Weeding. Elimination. Unless you can come up with a blinding flash of insight or something."

"I'm afraid it's all I can do to stay awake at the moment."

"I'm through here. I'll take you back to your hotel."

"With your permission, I'd like to take Lenore Gregory with me."

"I don't think so. She's still a contender, you know. She'd better stay here with the others."

"In that case, I shall stay here with her."

“You still convinced that she was the intended victim?”

“I am. And if she was, she’s still in danger.”

“Will you assume all responsibility for her?”

“Naturally.”

“All right. Take her along. The kid who came here with you, too. Al Fister. I’ll meet you on the dock after I make some arrangements here.”

“Thank you.”

Miss Withers went out into the passage past the patient watchdog and into the next stateroom. Aloysius Fister and Lenore Gregory were sitting together on the sofa. Lenore’s legs were tucked under her, and she had listed in Al’s direction until her head had snuggled into his shoulder. She was sound asleep, as was faithful Al. He had secured her snugly in place by putting one arm around her slender shoulders. On his engaging, ugly face was a blissful, foolish smile.

12.

“AND SO,” SAID MISS WITHERS, “having said so much, I shall say no more.”

She and Lenore and Al were in her room at the Canterbury, which had taken their delivery in the early hours of the morning by a Captain of Homicide with as superb aplomb as it had earlier taken the delivery of Miss Withers in the sidecar of a Hog. The captain had gone on his way, but Al, who had tagged along behind the police car, had been permitted to come up to the room which Miss Withers had secured at the desk in exchange for the one she had been occupying. This one was furnished with twin beds, and Lenore’s signature was on the register below.

As the above fragment of dialogue, or rather monologue, indicated, Miss Withers had explained her role in the events that had come last night to their grim climax, and had followed the explanation with a brief lecture on the foolishness of runaway girls who brought distress to their parents, problems to the police, and trouble to themselves. Lenore was properly contrite, but the tilt of her chin, the light in her eyes, and the slight flaring of the nostrils of her delicate nose betrayed the fact that her pride and independence were still not in utter tatters.

“I’m sorry, Miss Withers,” she said. “I’m sorry that I’ve been so much trouble to everyone, especially to Mother and Father and you, but this was something I had to do. I simply *had* to. It’s all right to sit and talk about things, but it’s no good unless you *do* something.”

“Nevertheless,” said Miss Withers, “it is possible to exercise good judgment about what you must do and how you should go about doing it. But we mustn’t sit here crying over spilled milk. The trouble you have caused others is no longer important. What’s important is the trouble you’ve caused yourself. You must realize that Captain Kelso, a reasonable man, suspects you, with good reason, of having committed murder.”

“I didn’t kill Captain Westering. What reason did I have?”

“That’s your question. I’d like to hear the answer.”

“I had no reason. Besides, I thought you were convinced that I was the one who was supposed to be poisoned.”

“So I was. And still am. Convincing Captain Kelso of that is another matter. Tell me, what did you think of Captain Westering?”

“He was a very strange man. He had a powerful personality. Sort of ... sort of mesmeric, if you know what I mean. When you were with him you had the oddest feeling that he could do anything, and that anything he did was right. He made you feel ... well, free and uninhibited, almost as if you were high on something.”

“And when you were away from him?”

Lenore Gregory hesitated. The silence stretched and grew taut as she sat looking down at her hands in her lap, an expression of puzzlement in her eyes. “It’s funny,” she said, “but when you were away from him, it wasn’t that way at all. At least, not for me. You had an uneasy feeling about him, and you began to have doubts about yourself and everything else. Like this voyage. It was a kind of fiasco, really.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, nothing seemed to go right. To be honest, I doubt if that old yacht could have made such a long voyage. There was a ship’s carpenter and a qualified marine engineer on board for two days, but they quit in disgust when they saw how things were. I was beginning to wonder if we’d ever get out of port. It was just a hopeless mess. But Captain Westering never seemed to lose faith, and when you were with him you believed yourself that everything would be all right.”

“When the people aboard the yacht were being questioned tonight, or last night, one thing was glaringly apparent. Some such view as you have expressed seemed to be common to all the females. The men, however, did not share it. On the contrary, I detected a strong current of resentment and even hatred. It’s difficult to understand such a sharp cleavage of opinion. Was this man a contemporary Svengali or something?”

“I don’t know what he was. I only know he’s dead, and all I can feel, now that he is, is a kind of relief.”

“That’s something else I noted. In spite of their extravagant opinion of the captain, none of the women, not a single one, including his wife, displayed the slightest sign of grief over his death. It’s odd. Very odd.” Miss Withers paused and took a deep breath, preparing herself to ask a crucial question. “My dear, it is now time to put something to you directly. It’s not, you understand, that I wish to be a prying old maid, but your answer may be critical in the light of events.”

“I know.” Color rising in her face like a shadow of roses, Lenore made an abrupt little gesture and shot a swift glance at Al, sitting patiently by.

“You want to know how free and uninhibited the captain and I actually got. If we made love, that is. We didn’t. Maybe sooner or later, but we hadn’t.”

“Did any of the others think you had?”

“I don’t know. You’d have to ask them.”

“Had any of the others, as you say, made love with the captain?”

“Possibly. Probably. You saw how it was on the yacht. Everyone crowded in together day and night, sleeping all over the place with practically no privacy at all. What’s more, the passengers or crew or whatever you want to call us weren’t exactly bound by the old standards, you see.”

“I see,” said Miss Withers drily, “precisely. I also see that such circumstances, however liberated those involved may think themselves, give rise to a very unsavory emotional climate. Hatreds develop, and murder is committed.”

“If you ask me,” Al Fister interrupted cheerfully, “murder isn’t such a bad solution in the cases of certain people.”

“Nonsense!” Miss Withers pinned him with a severe eye. “Murder is never a good solution in any case. If you have nothing constructive to contribute, Aloysius, please be silent.” She turned back to Lenore. “When you left New York, did anyone know where you were coming?”

“No. I was told about the voyage by a man who worked with me on CAP. The Committee of Artists for Peace. He may have guessed later where I came, but I didn’t tell him before I left.”

“Then it’s a fair assumption that no one back East knew definitely where you were?”

“Not at first. Later. I wrote to my roommate at school and told her. And I wrote to a fellow I went out with sometimes when I was working for CAP. Bud Hoffman, his name is. The Committee took him on after I had been working there for a while. I treated him rather badly, to tell the truth, and I thought maybe I owed him an explanation.”

“Did you receive a reply from either of them?”

“From Addie. My roommate. Adelaide Linton. Not from Bud. My letter came back unclaimed. He’d left CAP and gone away somewhere. I guess he felt like I’d done him a dirty trick, but I can’t help that. Anyhow, he was getting to be a problem. He kept urging me to marry him, and he was so intense about it and everything that it worried me. But never mind. It’s all over now. Addie said my father had been on campus inquiring about

me. I was going to write to him just before we sailed. You know. In time to let him and Mother know where I was going, but too late for him to do anything about it. So he wouldn't have time to stop me or make a big issue or anything like that."

"Well, it's apparent now that you are not going to sail, and so I suggest, after you get some sleep, that you pick up the telephone and call him." Miss Withers turned back to Al, indicating by her expression that she was both surprised and outraged to find him in her room. "Al, why do you continue to sit there like a dummy? Do you expect us to undress for bed with you here to ogle us? Go away."

As a matter of fact, Al had already been ogling Lenore, to his pleasure and her secret delight, and now he heaved his weary flesh and bones to their feet, grinning at Miss Withers. "I go," he said, "but, as a certain general said back in the Middle Ages, I shall return. Miss Withers, I'm in love. At last I've found someone I have something in common with. We're both drop-outs."

Miss Withers snorted, Miss Gregory almost leered, and Mr. Fister ambled out in style.

"There's an impertinent, lazy boy," said Miss Withers, "But I believe there is still hope for him."

She and Lenore showered in inverted order, beauty before age, and tumbled into their respective twins. Miss Withers, it seemed, had hardly hit the pillow and closed her eyes before she was jerked upright, her heart in her mouth, by the ringing of the telephone. She stared through fog at the face of her travel alarm on her bedside table. A few minutes after one o'clock. She picked up the phone and spoke groggily into it.

"So sorry to disturb you, Miss Withers," said a precise voice from the desk in the lobby, "but there is someone to see you. A Captain Kelso of the police. He's quite insistent."

Miss Withers shook the fog out of her head and was wide awake. "Tell Captain Kelso I'll be down in fifteen minutes if he wishes to wait."

She rolled out of bed and looked at the opposite twin. Lenore Gregory slept like an angel, undisturbed. If she had a guilty conscience, Miss Withers thought, it certainly didn't show. The spinster stealthily gathered her clothes, retired to the bathroom, and emerged soon after fully dressed. Lenore slept on. She was smiling about something. Miss Withers crept out and made her way to the elevators.

In the lobby, Captain Kelso rose from a deep chair to meet her. "Good afternoon," he said. His bald head shone. His face looked rested. He was apparently fully restored.

"Merciful heavens!" Miss Withers said. "Don't you *ever* sleep?"

"An old sinner like me? I pay for a dissolute life with chronic insomnia." He was almost gay in a lumbering sort of way. "I'm prepared to buy you lunch in this fancy gyp joint if you haven't eaten. On a cop's pay, that's real gallantry."

"As a superannuated gold digger, I accept. And it serves you right."

They had lunch in the patio restaurant, Captain Kelso staunchly rejecting Miss Withers' proposal that they go Dutch. Conversation avoided murder, or business related to murder, until they were having coffee.

"How's your charge?" Captain Kelso asked then.

"Sleeping the sleep of innocence. Don't fret about her."

"I'm not fretting. I was on the phone this morning with your pal in New York."

"With Oscar? How is he? I suppose, as usual, that he was very complimentary to me."

"Not exactly." Captain Kelso twisted his lips into a grin that he meant to be amiable. "He said you were a rare old bird, but that I'd better watch out or you'd have me up to my neck in corpses. He sent his regards."

Miss Withers sniffed contemptuously. "I can imagine. Thank you for an excellent lunch. Did you buy it for me because you can't resist my company, or do you have an ulterior motive?"

"Definitely ulterior. Since you dropped smack into the middle of this case, I thought you might be interested in going ahead with it."

"I admit that I feel rather committed. At least so long as a shadow of suspicion hangs over Lenore Gregory. I'm determined to save you from making a serious mistake."

"Thanks. I appreciate that. What did you think of our session aboard the tub last night?"

"Several things seemed apparent. First, anyone could have poisoned Captain Westering. Second, at least half of the suspects, namely the males, would have enjoyed doing it. Third, the other half, namely the females, were fascinated by him but didn't feel particularly outraged by his murder. Fourth, the circumstances were ripe for murder. Fifth, as I've told you repeatedly, the murder of the captain, in spite of all the excellent reasons for

it, was a mistake. Sixth, that was the most unlikely conglomeration of fits and misfits who ever planned to make a so-called pilgrimage together.”

“I’ll buy all your points except the fifth. I’m not convinced of that yet. I’ll add another point. The good captain may have been hot for peace and holy things, but he was no saint when it came to the ladies. To me, that points two ways. To the outraged consort of one of the ladies, or to home and mama. I’ve been thinking about mama, and she appeals to me. I’ve been thinking I’d run across the bridge to Sausalito and have another go at her.”

“I think you are mistaken. I have a feeling that the woman, despite her appearance, is practically sexless. I would give odds that she was completely indifferent to the peccadilloes of the captain. However, I am not an expert in such matters. I am deficient in personal experience. I could be wrong.”

“On the chance that you are, would you like to come along for a second diagnosis?”

Miss Withers folded her napkin neatly and stood up with alacrity. “I’d have made a dreadful scene if you hadn’t asked me,” she said.

13.

“DO YOU KNOW,” SAID CAPTAIN Kelso, “that approximately a dozen people a year jump off this damn thing? I guess they think it’s a romantic way to die, a grand gesture or something, but I can’t see it. The world is full of kooks.”

Ahead of them, the span of the great bridge that couldn’t be built stretched out toward waiting hills. Far below them, not golden but blue in the early afternoon sun, the Golden Gate was a glittering highroad between ocean and bay. On their right was a continent; on their left was Japan. Miss Withers, who had been swelling with exaltation, felt suddenly deflated. She sighed with resignation and looked sidewise somewhat caustically at Captain Kelso, who looked straight ahead with an eye to traffic.

“You,” she said, “are an incurable romantic. You should be a tour guide. Your knack for saying just the right thing is positively uncanny.”

“We get most of them out, of course. After they’re good and dead. But now and then one of them gets away from us on the ebb tide and winds up with the fishes. One of the strongest ebb tides in the world flows through this gate. I used to know how many cubic feet of water a second, but I’ve forgotten. Millions. Do you know how many gallons are contained in a cubic foot? Seven and a half. It’s a fact. I didn’t believe it when I heard it, so I tested it many years ago when I was a kid with one of those old-fashioned metal cookie boxes you used to see. Seven and a half was right. Would you believe it?”

“As an ex-schoolteacher who has taught the table of liquid measure more times than she likes to remember,” Miss Withers said, “I would. Nevertheless, I thank you for the information. It was exactly what I needed to make me appreciate this glorious view.”

After leaving the bridge, they followed U.S. 101 north and then turned east to Sausalito, a haven for artists hung upon the hills. Long staircases stretched up from street to houses. Miss Withers and Captain Kelso debarked at the foot of one and ascended, pausing at the top, in the weakness of age, to gasp for breath. Before them was a pampered emerald lawn divided by a walk of colored flags and made bright here and there by beds of flowers. Beyond the lawn, at the end of the walk, was a long, low house of gleaming white stucco with a roof of red tiles.

“Miss O’Higgins,” said Captain Kelso, “does herself proud.”

Miss Withers, comparing the place with her own modest dwelling in Santa Monica, agreed. She followed Captain Kelso up the walk to the house, where he punched a button that activated chimes within. They waited. Captain Kelso punched again. The door swung open to reveal a Grecian vision six feet tall. The golden morning of the night before. She was wearing a long white robe identical with the other one she had worn. Miss Withers wondered if she ever wore anything else. Around her neck, gleaming dully against the snowy expanse of her superb bosom, she wore a plain chain of gold links.

“Captain Kelso.” The clear golden tenor was untroubled and unsurprised. “Will you come in?”

Captain Kelso would. So, not specifically invited, would Miss Withers. They went in onto a kind of open foyer elevated two steps above the floor of a long, shadowy living room furnished with a few pieces of heavy dark furniture that Miss Withers took to be Spanish, and with an abundance of colored cushions, on the sofa and in chairs and scattered everywhere. Guests of Alura O’Higgins apparently did a lot of sitting on the floor. As did Aletha Westering now, letting herself down easily without the use of hands. Not, however, Captain Kelso or Miss Withers. They sat conventionally on the conventional sofa.

“I’m sorry,” said Aletha, “that my sister is not at home. She has gone to her restaurant. Usually she doesn’t go until evening, but something came up.”

“That’s all right,” Captain Kelso said, making a mental note that death in the family did not interfere with business as usual. “You’re the one we wanted to see.”

“Oh?” There was a ripple on the surface of Aletha’s serenity. “Why?”

“Why!” Captain Kelso struggled to keep a note of exasperation out of his voice. “Because a man was murdered last night, and you happen to be the man’s widow. I’m afraid, Mrs. Westering, that you don’t quite grasp the gravity of your position.”

“In what way is my position grave?”

“I just told you. You’re the widow of a murdered man. The widows of murdered men are naturally suspect until they are proved innocent.”

“I assured you last night that I didn’t kill my husband. What else can I do to convince you?”

“You can start by telling me the truth.”

“I have told you the truth.”

“Maybe. Now you had better tell me what you failed to tell me at all.”

“I’ve answered your questions. You’re free to ask any others that you choose.”

“All right. To begin with, what’s your name?”

She stared for a moment at the captain with a face as expressionless as an egg. “My name is Aletha Westering. Before that it was Aletha O’Higgins.”

“What has it been between the two?”

“It has been whatever my husband chose to make it. What’s in a name? It pleased Captain Westering to call himself whatever suited circumstances. As his wife, I naturally adopted the same name.”

“He must have been born with one. What was it?”

“The police, I’m sure, have methods of invading privacy. You would find out anyhow, so I suppose I may as well tell you.”

“That’s right.”

“It was Dwight. Frederick Dwight.”

“Where and when did you meet him?”

“In New Orleans, ten years ago. I was seventeen. I was in a convent there. We met, never mind how, and I ran away with him. We were married later in San Antonio, Texas.”

“Where have you lived since?”

“Various places. We moved around.”

“Under various names?”

“We used whatever name my husband fancied.”

“To evade the law?”

“No. Never.”

“How did you live?”

“My husband was a promoter. He engaged in a number of activities. I contributed in my own way.”

“What is your way?”

“I am blessed with the psychic gift. I contact the spirits of the dead.”

“You set yourself up as a medium?”

“As you say.”

“Have you contacted Captain Westering, perhaps?”

“It is much too early. In good time.”

“Maybe you could get him to tell you who murdered him.”

“He will tell me if he is moved to tell me. It may be a long time before he answers my summons.”

“How long?”

“Who knows? A month. A year. Ten years.”

“Sorry. I can’t afford to wait that long. Where did your husband get the money to buy his yacht? Yachts don’t cost peanuts, even old tubs like the *Karma*.”

“The money was provided. It was a reward for his regeneration, to make the pilgrimage of peace.”

“Regeneration?”

Again Aletha Westering was silent, sitting Indian-fashion on her cushion, staring past Captain Kelso and Miss Withers as if she were listening intently for a remote voice. Possibly, thought Miss Withers, the voice of the dear departed captain in the shades of limbo.

“Captain Kelso,” Aletha said suddenly, “are you familiar with St. Paul?”

“I’ve been there,” said the captain. “It’s in Minnesota.”

“St. Paul the man. The convert to Christ.”

“Oh, him. What about him?”

“On the road to Damascus he was struck blind and heard a voice. He was called Saul of Tarsus then. Thereafter, when his sight was restored, he was completely changed. From a persecutor of Christians he became one of them and their greatest apologist. He changed his name and taught the Word. It has been said by the cynical that he merely changed fanaticisms.”

“I’ve heard the story. Who hasn’t?”

“I am trying to draw a parallel with Captain Westering. Not long ago he, too, saw a great light which figuratively struck him blind. He, too, heard a voice. He, too, changed fanaticisms. Overnight he changed from a man who courted violence to a man who cherished peace. The pilgrimage to the land of war was his penance.”

“I guess he didn’t see the light soon enough, since violence caught up with him. I’d call poisoning a kind of violence, wouldn’t you? But no matter. You say the captain changed. Changed from what?”

“He was the leader of the Latter Day Vigilantes. Indeed, he was the founder of an organization of that name. The mission, under his direction, was to purchase and store arms, small arsenals, to be used against the

communists and other radicals when they seized control of the country. This was in Illinois. Headquarters was in Cicero.”

Captain Kelso had apparently become shockproof. His lower jaw dropped and hung, but after a moment he closed it firmly and spoke calmly through clenched teeth. “What, may I ask, brought about this amazing change of heart in the remarkable captain?”

“Change of heart? I don’t think so. The captain’s heart remained steadfast. I prefer to think of it as a change of direction.”

“Think of it as you like. What caused it?”

“Who knows? A dream? A vision? A miracle? The answer has gone with the captain. After it happened, whatever it was, it was no longer possible to remain the leader of an organization that had become, in an instant, abhorrent to him. An activist organization that stood for applied hatred—everything that he no longer believed in. There was clearly only one thing to do.”

“There was? What?”

“Simply to disappear. As quietly and quickly as possible. And so we did. We simply dropped from sight, he and I together.”

“Changing your name, naturally, to suit your change of direction.”

“As you say. Naturally.”

“What name did you use in Illinois?”

“I’ll tell you, as I have told you the rest of the story, only because you would find out anyhow. The name was Donner. The captain took the name of Martin Donner.”

Captain Kelso wrote the name carefully in his limp-backed book. He underscored it three times with restrained fury. “Changing it later to Westering?”

“Yes.”

“And after quietly disappearing, as you put it, did you come directly here?”

“No. We wandered. The captain had to learn to know himself as he had become, you see. To find his new way. My sister lived here. She had prospered in a worldly way. She offered a haven, and we finally sought it. It was here that the captain received the message that he was to lead a pilgrimage to the land of war.”

“The captain seems to have received a lot of messages. Did the message inform him that peace negotiations were going to begin before he

could get under way?”

“Peace negotiations? What are they? The killing goes on.”

“So it does. I can’t deny that.” Captain Kelso dry-scrubbed his scalp with knuckles. “It strikes me that there may have been some suspicious vigilantes when they woke up one morning around Cicero and found their leader had decamped. Some of them may even have been annoyed. Could that be another reason why the captain changed his name?”

Aletha Dwight-Donner-Westerling, to name a few names, was again silent, staring again beyond her guests into whatever world opened at their backs. If she was listening for a message, she must have received it. She spoke with that impregnable serenity that was assuming in Miss Withers’ mind a quality of terrible madness. “It is strange,” she said, “that you should ask that. As if the words were put into your mouth. When the captain was leader of the Latter Day Vigilantes, he had a young lieutenant who had come to us from nowhere. He was a dedicated worker, and he became second in command. Three nights ago he showed up here.”

It was Captain Kelso’s turn to be silent. Apparently he had turned suddenly to stone. Even his bald dome had taken on a fossilized appearance. “That’s very interesting,” he said at last. “Why didn’t you tell me this last night?”

“Last night I wasn’t prepared.”

“What did this lieutenant call himself?”

“Wagner. Bruno Wagner.”

“Sounds about right for a Latter Day Nazi. Pardon me. Vigilante. How had he found out where you were?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t say.”

“What did he want?”

“He was violent and abusive. He accused the captain of being a traitor and a thief. He demanded restitution, and threatened vengeance if he didn’t get it.”

“Restitution?”

“Yes. The Vigilantes had accumulated a considerable treasury. He had the absurd notion that the captain had stolen it.”

“I see. In other words, he wanted the captain to split the swag.”

“There was nothing to split. The captain explained that the treasury had been depleted by the purchase of arms and by other routine expenses of the organization.”

“Where were these arsenals hidden?”

“At various locations in the southern part of the state. In rural areas. I don’t know precisely. That was not my business.”

“Where is this Wagner now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Have you seen him since he showed up here?”

“No.”

“Do you think he murdered your husband?”

“It’s possible. If he did, he will pay for it.”

“You’d better believe it.”

“Vengeance will be had by a greater power than the San Francisco police, Captain.”

“Maybe so. But we’ll get first crack at him. The greater power, whatever it is, will have to take what’s left. What does this Wagner look like?”

“Medium height. Light hair. Rather ordinary, really. I seldom pay attention to physical appearances. My mind is absorbed by the spiritual.”

“Come off, Mrs. Westering. You can do better than that. If he’s your husband’s murderer, you must want him punished.”

“He will be punished.”

“Sure. I know. By a higher power.” Captain Kelso cracked his knuckles in a series of tiny explosions and stood up. “Was anyone here besides you and the captain when this Wagner came?”

“My sister Alura. If you need confirmation, she will supply it.”

“I’ll bet. Where is her restaurant located?”

“On Bridgeway. You can’t miss it. It’s called the Royal Edward.”

Miss Withers, following the captain’s cue, had risen also. Aletha Westering drifted up from her cushion like ascending smoke, effortlessly, again without the help of hands. She preceded them to the door and held it open.

“I guess I don’t have to tell you,” Captain Kelso said, “that you are to remain available until this investigation is closed.”

“You will find me here,” said Aletha Westering, “whenever you want me.”

Miss Withers passed out, the captain following. On the flagstone walk they paused, and Captain Kelso slapped his thigh violently with his battered

hat. "Another one!" he said. "Another suspect! By God, is there no end to them?"

"If there really *is* another one," said Miss Withers.

"I've got a feeling he's real, all right. Our Aletha is a superlative liar, no question about that, but I think she was telling the truth about that nasty Nazi episode. After all, it can be easily checked. Can you figure that Westering? St. Paul's Aunt Agnes!"

"All nonsense, of course. The captain was a charlatan. An incredible exhibitionist with absolutely no convictions who was capable of any pose so long as it made a good show. Right or left, it was all the same to him. Aletha was his perfect mate."

"How so?"

"I told you last night. Because she's capable of unlimited self-delusion. She *believes* her lies, and she believed her husband's lies. Therefore, she tells truth and lies so sincerely that it's almost impossible to sort them out. That business of being absorbed by the spiritual is not a pose, by the way. Depending, of course, on your definition of 'spiritual.' At any rate, there is very little of the physical about her."

"That's your opinion."

"It is."

"Then you don't like her as a jealous wife who would be up to killing a philandering husband?"

"Not in a million years. Nor her husband's supposed lover. If she put hemlock in that sherry, it was for some other motive."

"So you say. We'll see. On the other hand, poison doesn't seem like a weapon this Bruno Wagner character would use. Not direct enough. Not violent enough. A gun or a knife or his bare hands would be more his dish, from the sound of him."

"You can't be sure. Poison can have the advantage of working while the murderer is elsewhere, reducing his chances of getting caught. And a poison that grows wild has the advantage of being untraceable. We've been over that. However, a total stranger to Lenore Gregory would have no way of knowing that the sherry was reserved for her. If she was the intended victim, as I have been convinced all along, that lets Bruno Wagner out."

"Not for me," Captain Kelso said.

But he said it to Miss Withers' back, for the spinster had turned and started across the green grass of the lawn. He stood and watched her as she

made a tour of the flower beds, pausing for a while beside each. Pretty soon, she returned.

“Any hemlock?” he said.

“No. I’m not surprised. Hemlock is not commonly used as a decorative plant, as certain other poisonous kinds are. But it is readily available, nevertheless, to a knowledgeable person. I assume, incidentally, that the autopsy has verified my contention that it was hemlock?”

“Right. Regarding the identity of the poison, you batted a thousand.”

“The odor of parsnips left little doubt.”

“Regarding the other issue, though, you struck out.”

“What other issue?”

“Remember the Scotch? I promised you a report.”

“It had hemlock in it?”

“Loaded. What does that do to your theory that Lenore Gregory was the intended victim? If you ask me, it knocks it into a cocked hat.”

“I wouldn’t go so far.”

“No? Why not?”

“The fact that the Scotch was poisoned does not negate the fact that the sherry was poisoned also. Remember, please, that Lenore’s restriction to sherry was no secret. What the report opens up, it seems to me, is the possibility that *both* Lenore and the captain were intended victims.”

“Still eliminating your little friend, of course, as a suspect.”

“Of course. Anyhow, the Scotch had not been removed from the locker, which indicates that it was poisoned before she arrived for her meeting with the captain.”

“So what? Why not by her?”

“She would hardly have poisoned both the Scotch and the sherry she would be drinking herself.”

“Let me remind you that she *didn’t* drink any. Poisoning the sherry could have been a clever trick to try to avoid suspicion.”

“Not so clever if you see it so quickly. Lenore is neither guilty nor stupid.”

“Nuts. You’re what we call a prejudiced witness, that’s all.”

“You’re very kind. I’m perfectly aware that you really mean I’m a bull-headed old maid.”

“You said that. Not me. Well, we’d better go. I’ve got to get a net out for this Wagner bird. First, however, we’ll take time, being handy, to drop in

on sister Alura for a few minutes.”

14.

THE ROYAL EDWARD LOOKED back to the time of the royalty from whom it swiped its name, Victoria's unregenerate son; to the bawdy, gaudy days when nabobs scattered gingerbread mansions along San Francisco's steep streets, when Caruso sang at the Grand Opera House, when young Jack Barrymore patronized the Oyster Loaf, and when at last the city paid for its sins, on April 18, 1906, by shifting a few feet along the sides of its deep fault, and by burning thereafter for three days in a lurid nightmare. It was a place of beads and red plush and gilt. The dining room was deserted, it being too late for even late lunchers, but the ornate bar was in business, it never being too early for early drinkers.

Before going with Captain Kelso into the bar, Miss Withers paused to poke her nose over a red velvet rope that barred the way into the dining room. At one end, covering the entire width of the wall and all its height above gilded molding four feet from the floor, was a mural in bold colors depicting scenes from San Francisco's raffish past. It was, Miss Withers thought, a striking piece of work. The technique was confident, the colors arresting, the concept sweeping. She studied it for a moment, then turned away to rejoin Captain Kelso, who had stopped to await her patiently a few paces ahead.

"I was curious to see the mural," Miss Withers said.

"Mural?"

"Leslie Fitzgerald's. You remember that she told us last night that she had done a couple for this restaurant."

"Oh. I remember. I'm not much of an art fan myself. I used to like Maxfield Parrish when I was young."

Miss Withers shuddered and bit her tongue. She went on beside Captain Kelso into the bar. More gilt. More red plush. More beads. Rococo up to here.

Sitting sidewise on a stool at the end of the bar, one elbow braced on polished mahogany, one knee crossed over the other to reveal a couple of feet of admirable nylon below the hem of a dark red sheath, was Alura O'Higgins, proprietress, royalty as regal as Edward himself. She saw Captain Kelso and Miss Withers approaching and inclined her dark head in

the merest nod of recognition, gracious if not enthusiastic. The captain caught the nod and acknowledged it, but Miss Withers did not, having been distracted.

Her attention had been captured and held by a second mural above the back bar with its rows of colored bottles and shining glasses reflected in a long mirror. The mural was the length of the bar and quite narrow, fitting between the gilt frame of the mirror and the ceiling. No panorama of history here. Strategically placed and directed lights picked out the focal point of the work, the magnificent nude figure of a woman against a dark background in which indistinct figures seemed to have paused to ogle, enraptured, from the shadows. It achieved, somehow, an effect of suspension, as if in the next second everyone in the painting would begin to breathe and move. The focal figure, the magnificent nude figure, was lying face down on a rich red couch, her head raised and turned and her dark eyes looking over one shoulder and directly down, it seemed, into the eyes of Miss Withers. The latter felt a slight shock which caused a hitch in her breath and a thump in her pulse. No mistake about it. Not the slightest chance of inadvertent resemblance. The figure in the mural was Alura O'Higgins.

Miss Withers bumped against Captain Kelso's solid bulk, which had braked to a stop. With an appearance of confusion, she straightened her hat and murmured an apology, to which no one paid attention.

"Good afternoon, Captain," Alura said, nodding at the same time to the flustered spinster. "May I offer you something to drink? Or is it forbidden while you're on duty?"

"It's forbidden, which isn't always a deterrent. Not this time, though, thanks. We've only stopped for a few minutes. As a matter of fact, we really came over to see your sister. We've just come from there."

"I see. Perhaps we'd better move to a table where you can sit down."

She slipped off the stool and led the way to a table in a corner, removed from patrons, and they sat down in shadows at three points of a circle. Miss Withers' attention, irresistibly drawn, had returned to the mural. Oddly enough, although her position in the room was different, the dark eyes of the reclining figure still seemed to look directly into her own.

"I am admiring the mural," she said.

Alura smiled, her dark eyes enigmatic, pools of shadow in shadows. "Does it shock you?"

“Not at all. It’s quite remarkable.”

“It is I, you know.”

“Yes. That’s unmistakable. I recognized you at once.”

“Did you? Many people don’t. Perhaps you think I’m an incurable egoist. Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher. It’s my one indulgence in flagrant exhibitionism. Do you think it’s vulgar?”

“Far from it. A superb subject and a genuine talent save it from that. Last night on the yacht there was a young artist named Leslie Fitzgerald. She said that she had painted two murals for this restaurant.”

“Was Leslie aboard last night? I didn’t realize it. The mural is hers. The other is in the dining room.”

“I saw it as we came in. It, too, is exceptional.”

“Yes. Leslie has rare talent. Perhaps genius.” Alura turned abruptly toward Captain Kelso. “What did you want to see me about, Captain?”

The captain, his attention directed, was caught in the act of admiring Alura in the altogether. A dull red stain suffused his face and crept upstairs into his scalp. “We’re just after verification. Your sister told us a rather incredible story.”

“No doubt you are aware, Captain, that Aletha is given to telling incredible stories. She lives, indeed, in a kind of fantasy world where one believes what one desires, and it is often difficult to separate imagination from reality. However, you are referring, I suppose, to the episode of the Latter Day Vigilantes. Unfortunately, I fear, that is substantially true.”

“Did you know about all this when it was going on?”

“No. The first I knew about it was when this man who called himself Bruno Wagner showed up at my house several nights ago. There was a dreadful scene. It was all I could do to force him to leave. Aletha’s husband was thoroughly terrified. Captain Westering, as he was calling himself, was something of a coward. An imposing coward, I grant you. He had a magnificent façade.”

“I get the impression that you didn’t like your brother-in-law.”

“That didn’t matter. Aletha was completely deluded by him. She saw him as a glamorous and extraordinary man. As, in a way, he was. That’s why she followed him about for over a decade from one escapade to another. If she had ever seen through him, the husk that he was, it would have destroyed her, I’m sure. I didn’t want that to happen. Do you think she

shows strangely little grief at his death? That's because of the way he died. In her eyes, he's a martyr. He died, you see, in a great cause."

"Is that why you agreed to invest money in this lunatic voyage?"

"It is. But I never thought that my investment would be considerable. I was convinced that the *Karma* would never sail."

"I see. You seem to be devoted to your sister."

"I suppose I am. At least, I'm committed to her, although I had not seen her for many years before she and her husband showed up here. Maybe I feel guilty for having neglected her so long. It might help you to understand if I were to tell you something about our background."

"I'd appreciate it."

"Very well. We were born in New Orleans. Our mother was an entertainer. Our father was an Irish adventurer who always seemed to have a finger in some South American or Central American pie. I am five years older than Aletha. Our mother died when Aletha was born. We were farmed out for several years, and saw our father infrequently. Eventually we were placed by him in a convent. When I was old enough, or rather *long* before I was old enough, I escaped and came to San Francisco. I managed to do well for myself, but never mind that. I learned after quite a long time that Aletha had also escaped from the convent. She'd run away with a man. The man you know as Captain Westering. For the next decade I didn't see them, but I had word from Aletha now and again. Sometimes I sent her money. Then the two of them suddenly appeared here, and Captain Westering cooked up this fantastic scheme for a peace pilgrimage. You know the rest."

"Not quite. Where did Captain Westering get the money to buy the *Karma*?"

"I don't know. He obviously had some source of money. When I asked Aletha, she would only say that the means were provided."

"What did you think after the scene with Bruno Wagner?"

"He accused the captain of being a thief. He may have been."

"Your sister's description of this Wagner was vague. Can you do better?"

"He was medium height. Stocky build. Pale blond hair. Otherwise, nothing distinctive."

"Accent?"

"Not noticeably. Nothing Teutonic or guttural, as the name suggests, if that's what you mean."

“Scars?”

“None visible.”

“Do you have any idea where he is now?”

“No. I haven’t seen him since that night.”

“All right. Thanks very much.” Captain Kelso shoved back his chair and stood up, Miss Withers following suit. “I’ll see you again if necessary.”

“If I am not here or at home, there’s always someone who will know where.”

The captain and Miss Withers went out together. The eyes of Alura, larger than life in the mural behind the bar, seemed to follow them as they went.

They were on the bridge above the Gate before Captain Kelso spoke again. “The sisters O’Higgins,” he said, “are something.”

“So,” said Miss Withers, “they are.”

“In my mind,” he said, “Alura no less than Aletha.”

“Nor less,” Miss Withers said, “in mine.”

“Fancy home. Fancy restaurant. Quite a climb for a runaway from a convent. I wonder how she managed it?”

“I’d be interested to know.”

“After I find out, I may tell you. I’ll get on it. On the mysterious Mr. Wagner, too. First I’ll drop you off.”

He did, in front of the Canterbury, and left while she was still on the curb, without promising or threatening to see her again, soon or late. Inside, crossing the lobby to the elevators, Miss Withers was hailed by a familiar voice. Stopping and turning toward it, she saw Al Fister standing in front of a sofa against the exotic background of a potted palm, with an imperious index finger curled in a come-hither gesture. Beside him, still seated on the sofa and looking as if she had never seen a dead body or been suspected of making it dead, was Lenore Gregory. Miss Withers went over and sat down on the sofa, leaving room between herself and Lenore for Al, who promptly claimed the space.

“You are looking remarkably recovered, I must say,” said Miss Withers to Lenore, removing her gorgeous hat and placing it in her lap.

“I feel fine,” said Lenore.

“Is that so? Well, one mustn’t get too confident too soon.” Miss Withers looked suspiciously at Al. “Aloysius, what are you doing here?”

"I've come to report," Al said cheerfully. "Unless, that is, I've been fired."

"Nothing of the sort, young man. You have merely been superseded. Private-eyes must retire when the official police take over."

"In that case, I guess you wouldn't be interested in hearing what I have to report."

"Don't be difficult. If you have anything of consequence to report, let's have it."

"Well, when I got to my buddy's room this morning, I hit the sack, but I couldn't sleep very well, and so after three hours or so I got up and started thinking about last night, the murder and all, and I decided to go back down to where the *Karma*'s docked, and I went. The old tub's all tied up by the fuzz, of course, and I couldn't get aboard, so I just hung around to see what I could see. I had been there about an hour, I guess, just hanging around, when I saw something. Guess what."

"Young man, this is no guessing game. Tell me what you saw and be done with it."

"Well, not what. Who. I saw the guy that I saw sneaking off the yacht last night. At least, I'm pretty sure it was him. Long hair. Dark glasses. And he moved about the same. Sort of erect and quick, if you know what I mean."

"What did you do?"

"Just what any good private-eye would have done. I tailed him."

"Heaven help us! Well, never mind. You lost him, of course?"

"That's a funny thing. I thought I hadn't, but then I guess I did."

"Run that past again, if you don't mind."

"What I mean is, I followed him to where he was going, but when I checked where he went he wasn't there."

"Young man, are you trying deliberately to befuddle me?"

"No, ma'am. Look, Miss Withers. Let me tell you how it was."

"I'd be delighted."

"All right. I was standing there on the dock, just watching, and after quite a while this hippie-type suddenly appeared and walked across the dock toward the yacht, but there was a cop there who stopped him. They talked for a minute, the cop probably explaining why he couldn't go aboard, and then this cat turned and walked away, like I said, sort of erect and quick."

“If the policeman had had his wits about him, or had been properly informed, he’d have detained this person. Apparently the lines of communication in the Homicide Bureau are not as open as they should be. But go on with your story. Subject departed. Marlowe tailed him.”

“Right. He was afoot, and so I left the Hog and followed likewise. To make a long story short, he went to a kind of flophouse, I guess it was, in the North Beach section where the beatniks started. Actually, the ground floor is a second-hand shop, mostly clothes, but in the window there’s a sign advertising rooms for rent upstairs, and there’s an inside stairway leading directly up to the rooms from the street. The cat I was following went up these stairs, and after a couple of minutes I went up after him. The hall up there makes a jog, across the front of the building, and then runs straight back through the center to the rear. I didn’t know what to do, but pretty soon I decided I’d just knock on doors until I hit the one this cat had gone through, and at least I could get a close look at him and then decide later what else to do. There were only four doors, two on each side of the hall. There wasn’t any answer at the first. There were answers at the other three, all right, but not by the cat I’d followed.”

“Perhaps he was in the room where you got no answer.”

“No. I asked at the next door if anyone was in there, and the man said the room wasn’t rented.”

“Was there a rear stairway?”

“No stairway. There was a bathroom at the end of the hall and a window in the bathroom with a fire escape outside. I checked.”

“Was the window locked?”

“Closed but not locked. He could have gone out that way, all right.”

“If he did, it means that he was familiar with the building. He must have detected you following him and chosen that way to shake you. What did you do when you realized he was gone?”

“What *could* I do? I went back and picked up the Hog and came on here, that’s what I did. You were out with Captain Kelso, but Lenore was here, and we’ve been together here in the lobby waiting for you.”

Saying this, Al looked at Lenore with an expression that Miss Withers considered extremely silly. The ex-schoolma’am, thoroughly acquainted by her experience among the small fry with the sick-calf look, had the distinct impression that her absence had not been especially lamented, nor her return especially welcomed. She stood up and clapped her hat on her head.

“You did well, Al. At least, I suppose, as well as could be expected. I’m going upstairs to bathe and change. If you two will wait until I come down again, I’ll treat you to an early dinner.”

Upstairs, fortunately before she was in the tub, the phone began to ring. Answering it, she was greeted by the distant bark of Inspector Oscar Piper.

“Hildy?”

“How are you, Oscar?”

“*I’m* all right. There’s nothing wrong with *me*. What’s going on out there? What the devil kind of mess have you got yourself into now?”

“Well, of all the abominable Irish ingrates! If I’m in a mess, Oscar, as you put it, it was you, as I recall, who got me into it.”

“I asked you to find a girl for me. Just to do me the simple favor of finding one runaway girl for me. I didn’t ask you to brew up a murder on the side.”

“Don’t be absurd, Oscar. If someone decided to murder someone, I can hardly be held responsible.”

“Well, get out of it. Do you hear? Get right out of it and stay out.”

“Inasmuch as I was on the scene, that’s easier said than done.”

“Is Kelso close to a solution?”

“My dear Oscar, do you expect miracles? The murder was committed only last night. We are working on it.”

“*We!*”

“Captain Kelso and I. He has been most cooperative.”

“Judas Priest! I think I’d better get out there fast.”

“That is unnecessary, I assure you. We are doing quite well without you.”

“What’s the situation of the Gregory girl?”

“It was precarious at first. I’m certain that it’s now improved.”

“Papa wants to know if she needs a lawyer.”

“A lawyer at this stage would be premature. Probably there will be no need for one at all.”

“I still think maybe I’d better fly out.”

“Nonsense. You had better stay at home and attend to your own affairs.”

“Well, you take care of yourself, Hildy. Understand me? Don’t go rocking the boat.”

“As always, Oscar, I’ll practice the utmost discretion.”

She hung up in the middle of his derisive snort. At the end of it, Inspector Piper hung up too.

Miss Withers returned to the business of bathing. Inspector Piper, after a minute’s reflection with corrugated brow, picked up the phone again and called the airport.

15.

THE NEXT DAY MISS Withers was up early, while Lenore still slept, and went down alone to breakfast. Later, stoked with sausage and eggs, she returned to her room. The second twin was empty, and from the bathroom, to which the door was half open in healthy indifference to persnickety propriety, came the sound of luxurious wallowing threaded with the thin silver sound of a young voice, slightly off-key, singing words incomprehensible and gay. Miss Withers sat down with her feet together and her hands folded, a picture of primness that was far from expressing the warmth of her feelings, and waited. In due time, rubbed rosy from head to foot, Lenore popped out of the bathroom and with a mild exclamation stopped short at the sight of Miss Withers. Out of deference to Miss Withers' refined sensibilities, strictly assumed, she wrapped the bath towel, trailing from one hand, inadequately around her approximate middle third.

"I didn't know you'd come back," she said. "Good morning."

"Good morning," Miss Withers said.

"I've been taking a bath."

"So I see. Always a commendable project."

"Have you been down to breakfast?"

"Yes. I'm afraid that I'm an early riser. Did I disturb you?"

"Oh, no. On the contrary, I must be a terrible nuisance. It was kind of you to take me under your wing."

"Nonsense. To be honest, I was much more tempted to take you over my knee."

Lenore's face fell into a contrite expression that was somehow short of convincing. "I know. I've caused you no end of anxiety and trouble."

"Have you called your father?"

"Yes. I talked a fortune with Father and Mother both. They feel much better now. I assured them that everything is all right."

"Perhaps you are optimistic. As the old saying goes, you are not out of the woods yet."

"What? Oh, I see. You mean because I was with Captain Westering when he died."

“That’s what I mean. You may be out of the critical stage, but your condition remains grave.”

“Everything will work out. You’ll see to that.”

“Indeed! I wish I could share your confidence.”

“Al told me all about you. How you used to help the police in New York and all. He said you’re a ring-tailed wonder.”

“Aloysius is a good boy, but his judgment is hardly infallible. As his impoverished description of me indicates, he also tends to be crude. Why are you standing there in that towel? I definitely have the impression that you have nothing that needs to be hidden. I suggest that you get dressed and go down for your breakfast.”

“That’s a good suggestion. I’m famished.”

“I can recommend the sausage and eggs.”

Lenore abandoned her towel and got into her clothing, of which, Miss Withers thought, there was precious little. In a matter of minutes the young virgin was on her way downstairs, and the elderly one was reaching for the telephone. In another minute, after a minimum of difficulty with a mildly inquisitive policeman, she was talking with Captain Kelso.

“How are you this morning, Miss Withers? And how’s the leading suspect? Keeping her under your thumb, I hope.”

“My dear Captain Kelso, a person guilty of murder does not sleep like a baby and sing in the bathtub like a tone-deaf canary. But I haven’t called you to talk nonsense. I am wondering if you would care to call on a young lady with me.”

“Sorry. I’ll be up to my ears. What young lady?”

“Leslie Fitzgerald. A superior artist, that one. I’m most curious about her.”

“Maybe you can get her to do your portrait.” Captain Kelso laughed a leer. “Only don’t let her paint you like she did Alura.”

“Never fear. I’m no Duchess of Alva.”

“Who?”

“Skip it. Is Miss Fitzgerald still being held aboard the yacht?”

“No. Nobody’s being held. You can’t hold free citizens forever, you know. Not even kooks. Of course, most of them are living aboard until this thing’s settled. They haven’t got any place else in town to stay.”

“Miss Fitzgerald, I understand, has a studio.”

“Right.”

“Do you object to my calling on her without you?”

“Help yourself. There’s no law against making calls.”

“Do you have the address of her studio?”

“Just a minute.”

The open line buzzed in Miss Withers’ ear while Captain Kelso, she assumed, consulted his limp-backed notebook. In thirty seconds he was back with an address on the Embarcadero.

“That’s in the block below the Ferry Building,” he said. “I understand a lot of artists have studios around there.”

Miss Withers thanked him and hung up. She selected a hat, a magnificent creation designed to stun the observer, adjusted it with care in front of the mirror, and sat down again to await the return of Lenore. Time passed. Lenore did not come. Miss Withers looked at her watch and made a little clucking sound of impatience. She got up and left the room and rode an elevator down to the lobby.

In the dining room, she found Lenore dawdling over coffee which had grown too cold to drink. The reason for her dawdling was not hard to see. In fact, it stuck out like a scarecrow in a cornfield. Sitting across the table from her, leaning forward with his elbows on the table and his chin in his hands and an expression of the most disgusting entrancement on his face, was Al Fister. Miss Withers, approaching, was no distraction.

“Aloysius,” she said, “what are you doing here so early in the day?”

Al started, transferring his gaze reluctantly from Lenore to Miss Withers. “You promised,” he said, his voice pained. “You promised, and you keep breaking your promise. You keep calling me Aloysius.”

“I call you Aloysius only when you *act* and *look* like Aloysius. Answer my question.”

“Just reporting for duty, Miss Withers.”

Miss Withers made a sound perilously close to a raspberry. “Since when has it been your duty to watch Lenore like a hungry vulture? I didn’t extricate her from one threat just to introduce her to a worse one.”

“Miss Withers,” said Al reproachfully, “you’re shooting me down.”

“Nonsense. We’re wasting time. Lenore and I must go out. If you insist, you may come along.”

“Where are you going?”

“You will learn in good time.”

Miss Withers, without further ado, turned and walked briskly out of the dining room. Al and Lenore followed far afield, dragging their heels. They caught up at the entrance to the hotel, where Miss Withers was waiting while the doorman hailed a cab. When the cab pulled up, Miss Withers climbed into the back, Al and Lenore after her.

"The Embarcadero," Miss Withers instructed the driver.

"Where on the Embarcadero?"

"The Ferry Building will do. I'll get out there."

Shortly thereafter she was out, paying off the driver as Al and Lenore stood by. Having paid the fare, including a modest tip, she turned to the pair, with particular attention to Al.

"Al," she said, "have you had your breakfast?"

Al shook his head. "I was going to eat at the hotel, but you drug us away before I could."

"There is, I believe, a lunchroom under the Ferry Building. Go eat. Lenore will keep you company. In spite of the nauseating axiom to the contrary, one cannot live on love. After you've eaten, wait for me. I'll not be long. Indeed, inasmuch as I'm not expected, I may return immediately."

"Expected by who?"

"*Whom!* Young man, if you're going to fraternize with a Bennington student, even one apparently inclined toward idiocy, you had better make a reasonable effort to become literate."

"All *right*, Miss Withers. Whom?"

"A young lady. An artist. She has a studio in the next block. Her name, which will mean nothing to you, is Leslie Fitzgerald."

"Look, Miss Withers." Al's homely, appealing face was concerned.

"Are you sure you'll be all right?"

"Quite sure."

"Maybe I'd better come along with you."

"You will not be needed. Nor, to put it bluntly, wanted. Don't worry. There is no danger involved, and if there were, I know perfectly well how to take care of myself. You take care of Lenore. After all, I made an absurd promise to Captain Kelso, and I had better make a gesture at least toward keeping it."

With which assurance Miss Withers marched off. She crossed the street and entered a block of shabby buildings which somehow achieved, or perhaps retained, the raffish air of earlier, bawdier days. Across the wide

thoroughfare of the Embarcadero, the great piers of the waterfront jugged into the bay. Facing them along the ragged little block were seamen's bars, rooming establishments and clothing stores. Miss Withers passed a remarkably long, narrow and dark bar, and immediately afterward was climbing narrow stairs in a decaying building to a closed door at the upper end of the flight. She rapped imperiously on the door.

After a long wait, just as she was about to repeat her rapping, the door swung inward to reveal Leslie Fitzgerald, a faint frown of irritation on her thin, lovely face. She had obviously been interrupted at work, for she was wearing a pair of paint-smeared Levis and an old sweatshirt much too large for her slender body, and in her hands was a large rag with which she rubbed her fingers with a circular washing motion that was further evidence of her irritation. Miss Withers, though unrepentant, was not offended. She approved of people who were sufficiently devoted to their work to resent having it interrupted.

"Forgive me for disturbing you," she said, "but I would like to talk with you for a few minutes."

"I'm sorry." Leslie Fitzgerald made no effort to disguise her impatience. "I'm busy, and I have no time. Perhaps you could return later."

"I assure you that it's important. If you could spare me only a few minutes ..."

"What do you want? Do you want to buy a painting?"

"That may be, but it isn't the reason for this intrusion. I would like to talk with you about the death of Captain Westering."

All this while, as she stared at Miss Withers, a look of puzzlement had been encroaching on the irritation in Leslie Fitzgerald's face. Now both gave way suddenly before a flood of recognition. "Of course! I kept thinking I'd seen you somewhere recently. You were with Captain Kelso aboard the *Karma*."

"That's correct. Miss Hildegard Withers. May I come in?"

"I suppose so. I don't enjoy being rude, but I dislike stopping my work when it's going well."

"I quite understand. I'll be as brief as possible."

Leslie Fitzgerald stepped aside, and Miss Withers walked past her into a large loft flooded with light that poured in through a skylight and through a vast expanse of glass in the north wall. The room seemed bare, Spartan-like, with a couch and a few pieces of furniture clustered in a corner.

Unframed canvases leaned against the walls. Near the center of the room, in a wide uncluttered space, an easel was turned toward the glass. Dust motes danced in the flood of light.

“Will you have some coffee?” Leslie Fitzgerald asked.

“No, thank you.”

“Perhaps you’d better come over here and sit down. As you see, there isn’t much of any place else.”

She led Miss Withers to the cluster in the corner and gestured toward a chair, which Miss Withers occupied. Leslie Fitzgerald sat on the couch, which apparently served her at night as a bed.

“Now,” she said, “what is it that you want to talk with me about? Do you represent the police?”

“No. Not officially. I came here, however, with the knowledge and permission of Captain Kelso. Yesterday I saw some of your work. I thought it was excellent.”

“Thank you.” Leslie Fitzgerald’s tone, while polite, clearly suggested skepticism of Miss Withers’ qualifications as an art critic. “But surely you didn’t come here just to tell me that.”

“The murals in the Royal Edward, I mean. Alura O’Higgins’ restaurant. Of the two, I was most struck by the one in the bar. Quite remarkable.”

The expression of puzzlement was again creeping into Leslie Fitzgerald’s face. “Frankly,” she said, “I shouldn’t have imagined that that particular painting would have been your cup of tea.”

“Young lady, I may *look* like an old maid, and I may *act* like an old maid, but it would be a mistake to assume that I *think* like an old maid. I am not offended by the human body, and frequently I even find it admirable.”

Leslie Fitzgerald laughed. “I’m sorry. It was stupid of me to imply such a thing. The figure is Alura herself, you know. I did it here in the studio.”

“I recognized her. I wonder why she chose herself as a subject?”

“Why not? She was a superb model. Besides, I am sure it amuses her to see herself there on the wall. Alura is an exceptional woman. Like all exceptional women, or exceptional men, for that matter, she is not without vanity.”

“How long had you known Alura O’Higgins before she commissioned you to do the murals?”

“Not long. We met at a cocktail party. She seldom goes to such things, and neither do I, but we both happened to go to this one. It gave us a kind of common ground. We met and had quite a long conversation, and a week or so later she showed up here at the studio. She looked at the work I had available, and before she left she had given me the commission for the murals. Since then she has been instrumental in getting me numerous lucrative commissions.”

“You’re too modest. Surely your work sells itself.”

“It’s good to think so.”

“You’ve remained her friend?”

“I’m very fond of her. And she, I think, of me.”

“Was it she who persuaded you to make the pilgrimage with Captain Westering aboard the *Karma*?”

“Not at all. I learned of the voyage through Alura, but she didn’t urge me to join. I feel very strongly about the war in Vietnam, as all sensitive people should, and it was my own decision to go. I felt it was my duty to help make such a grand gesture. It was a kind of commitment, and even when it began to look as if it were surely an ill-fated effort, I was determined to go through with it. To tell the truth, Alura was opposed to my making the voyage. She said it was more important for me to stay here and dedicate myself to my art. After peace talks were arranged, she was particularly insistent. She said the whole point of the voyage was gone, and perhaps it was. Nevertheless, I was committed. If the *Karma* had sailed, I’d have sailed with her.”

“What did you think of Captain Westering?”

Leslie Fitzgerald did not answer. She got up and hefted an electric percolator, which was unplugged and seemed to be empty. “Are you sure you wouldn’t like a cup of coffee?” she said.

“Quite sure, thank you.”

“I believe I would, if you don’t mind. I’m quite addicted to coffee, I’m afraid.”

“It’s a much more innocent addiction than others you might have.”

“That’s true, isn’t it? If you’ll excuse me, I’ll go brew a pot.”

Carrying the percolator, she disappeared through a door into what must have been a small kitchen. Miss Withers, in a moment, could hear the sound of running water. Leslie Fitzgerald would have to empty the basket of old grounds, rinse the basket and the pot, refill the one with fresh grounds and

fill the other with water. It would take a minute or two. Miss Withers was up in a flash, thumbing through a disorderly litter of preliminary sketches on an ancient library table near the wall where the canvases leaned. Her action was not directed toward a specific objective. Indeed, the action was almost instinctive. Miss Withers, in brief, was an insatiable snoop who had learned from experience that curiosity, although it may have killed the cat, often paid unexpected dividends to uninhibited spinsters. Which was, as it turned out, true in this case. She was holding the dividend in her hands at arm's length, inspecting it intently, when Leslie Fitzgerald returned, plugged in the percolator, and sat down again on the couch.

"Make yourself at home," Leslie said.

"Forgive me." Miss Withers failed miserably to make herself sound properly contrite. "I'm afraid that I'm hopelessly curious."

"It's all right. There's nothing there of great interest."

"On the contrary, I find this sketch very interesting indeed."

"Really?"

"It looks like the head of Captain Westering."

"That's because it is."

"I asked you what you thought of the captain. I don't believe you've answered."

"It depended on whether I was with him or away from him. Now that he's dead, I think he was a fraud. More. He was a conscienceless opportunist."

"And yet you would have sailed with him?"

"Yes. After all, many prophets have been largely frauds. It's the cause that counts, not the leader."

"I understand that you did not stay aboard the *Karma* with the others."

"That's right. I stayed here and did my work."

"Apparently your work included a portrait of the captain. I assume that this sketch was preliminary to a portrait. Was it?"

Leslie Fitzgerald shrugged her slender shoulders as if the subject of discussion, a tolerable invasion of her private affairs, was more boring than offensive. "Yes. In the beginning he came merely to discuss certain details of the voyage. Ostensibly, at least. But when he had seen some of my work, he became very eager for me to do a portrait of him. I was just finishing a portrait when he first came, and I suppose that's what gave him the idea of having one done of himself. Captain Westering was a monstrously vain

man. At any rate, he prevailed upon me to do it, and after that he came for sittings. To tell the truth, I wanted very much myself to do the portrait. It was a challenge, you see. How can I explain it? It was a matter of painting him exactly as he was on the surface, and at the same time, somehow, of letting the inside man, the hidden character, show through.”

“Did you finish the portrait?”

“Practically. There were a few finishing touches to be done when he died. They can be done without him, but I haven’t touched it.”

“Is it here? I’d like very much to see it.”

“If you wish. I’ll put it on the easel.”

She stood up, hesitated a moment uncertainly, and then went over to a stack of canvases inclined against a wall. She took up the uppermost canvas without looking at it and carried it to the easel. After it was in position, she stepped back and turned away with an air of indifference, almost of apathy. Miss Withers went over into the flood of light, standing a few paces back from the portrait, and looked at the face, trapped in oils, of the late Captain Westering.

She sucked in her breath with a sharp hiss, feeling as if she had been prodded in the solar plexus. Leslie Fitzgerald had caught the captain in all his flamboyance. Dark hair curling slightly above the ears, where it was touched with premature gray. Thin dark face with a bold nose and dimpled chin betraying a trace of weakness. The eyes were veiled, shining in the slits of lids, and on the full lips was surely the most enigmatic smile that any artist had caught and fixed since Leonardo had done the Mona Lisa. But the total effect was far from glamorous. By a kind of miraculous combustion of pigments and genius, the face was a mask behind which was only a terrible and terrifying emptiness. The portrait was a devastating and devilish piece of work.

“Paint me as you see me,” Miss Withers said.

“What? Oh. It was Oliver Cromwell who was supposed to have said that, wasn’t it, when he was sitting for his portrait?”

“Yes. Supposedly. I doubt that you received the same instructions from your subject.”

“Hardly. Captain Westering wished to be painted as he saw himself.”

“Did he understand what you had done in this portrait?”

“He never saw it. I can’t tolerate having anyone look at my work in progress. Perhaps I’d have shown it to him when I had finished. Perhaps I’d

have destroyed it.”

“To avoid destroying the captain himself?”

“I don’t know. I doubt it. As I said, he was a vain man. I doubt that he would have let himself see in the portrait what you have just seen. No matter now. He’s dead.”

Leslie Fitzgerald went back to the couch. Miss Withers followed.

“You saw the captain clear and saw him true,” she said. “In spite of this, I take it, you found him charming?”

“I did. Strangely enough, there was a poignant sort of charm in the contrast of what he was with what he pretended to be. Can you understand that?”

“I confess that I find it difficult. But it’s your effect, not mine. When the captain was sitting for you, it must have made for circumstances of considerable intimacy.”

Leslie Fitzgerald smiled. She rid herself of her cup and dug into a pocket of her Levis for a mashed pack of cigarettes and a book of paper matches. Miss Withers watched her as she lit the cigarette and inhaled deeply. So far as the spinster could tell, Leslie Fitzgerald’s amusement was genuine and untroubled.

“Are you being delicate, Miss Withers? If you’re trying to ask if the captain ever scored with me, as the hippies put it, the answer is, of course, none of your business. However, you are welcome to speculate. Here was the glamorous captain, and here was I. Circumstances, as you point out, were intimate. I have known other men in other times and places, Miss Withers, and I have never been able to consider the nature of my relationships with them to be a cardinal issue of ethics. I live as I please, and the pill has set me free.”

“I suppose,” said Miss Withers a little sadly, “that I am hopelessly old-fashioned. If I seem to be prying, I’m sorry. Do you know Lenore Gregory?”

“Isn’t she the girl who showed up from the East somewhere? Yes, I’ve met her. A lovely girl. The marks of good breeding. Why?”

“I understand that Captain Westering betrayed considerable interest in her.”

“Captain Westering betrayed considerable interest in all attractive girls. The captain, to put it bluntly, was something of a stud.”

“Nevertheless, his interest in Lenore Gregory seemed to be exceptional. For instance, he kept a supply of sherry for her in his cabin. Did you know that?”

“I did not. Why should I?”

“I merely wondered. The sherry was poisoned. As you must know, it was the sherry that killed the captain.”

“I understood you to say that he kept the sherry for Lenore Gregory.”

“My point precisely. It is possible that the captain died by accident. It may have been Lenore who was intended to die.”

Leslie Fitzgerald sat staring for a moment at Miss Withers as though she found it impossible to believe what she heard, or to draw from it the implications that seemed to be meant. Then she suddenly burst into laughter, and the laughter, like her smile a while ago, had the quality of genuine amusement.

“I get it,” she said. “I am suspected of having tried to eliminate, in a fit of deadly jealousy, the hated female who supplanted me in the captain’s rather seamy favor. Surely you can see how absurd that is. In the first place, I am not a murderer. I lack that kind of egotism which would make me believe that I could ever get away with it. In the second place, my relationship with the captain, shameful as it may seem to you, was no more than casual. An indulgence, if you will. In the third place, no man on earth could be important enough in my life to make the losing of him traumatic. At the risk of sounding corny, I’m in love with my work. Men are sometimes satisfying, even necessary, but they are always incidental.”

Miss Withers got to her feet in a semblance of confusion, managing by art and prior practice to look somewhat foolish. “Please forgive me,” she said. “I think I have intruded long enough. Thank you for putting up with me.”

She let herself out of the loft and descended to the Embarcadero. Returning as she had come, past bars and shops and haberdasheries, she found Al and Lenore waiting faithfully, if not patiently, in front of the Ferry Building.

16.

THAT EVENING CAPTAIN KELSO called.

“How about a date?” he said.

“I could,” said Miss Withers, “be coaxed.”

“Dinner at Bardelli’s. The minestrone is a dream. The filet of sole is out of this world. A little chunk of yesterday surviving in today. It’ll bring back the years of our youth.”

“I’m wavering.”

“And I’ve got a little surprise for you.”

“That will be quite a trick. I’m seldom surprised, nowadays, by anything.”

“I’ll pick you up in an hour.”

He rang off, and Miss Withers turned to Lenore, who was watching her with poorly dissembled curiosity.

“Captain Kelso,” Miss Withers said. “He’s taking me to dinner.”

“Miss Withers,” Lenore said, “how do you do it? You’re a real enchantress, I mean. I do believe you have the poor captain in your spell.”

Miss Withers snorted. “Don’t talk rubbish. He wants to pick my brains, that’s all, and pay me off with a plate of minestrone. You will have to fend for yourself this evening, I’m afraid.”

“That’s all right. I’ve just been working myself up to asking you if it would be all right for me to go out to dinner with Al?”

“Are you prepared to pay the check?”

“We’ll go Dutch.”

“Just as I suspected. Not that Aloysius is parsimonious, you understand. It’s just that you can’t get water from a dry well.”

“Is it all right, then?”

“If you can stand it, why should I object?”

“Well, I’ve been put in your custody, more or less. I wouldn’t want to break jail.”

“Consider yourself a trustee. And don’t drink any sherry.”

With this remark, which was not entirely without serious intent, Miss Withers turned to the business of bathing and dressing. There being very little these days that she could do or wanted to do to improve what was

naturally hers, she was finished long before her allotted hour was up, and to save the captain a call from the lobby, she went downstairs and took up a position with a view of the entrance. Soon the captain lumbered in. At his shoulder, trailing half a pace, was a small, wiry man with grizzled hair. Miss Withers' heart jumped, lifting her bodily from the chair. She advanced to be recognized, fighting to show a proper lack of enthusiasm in order to disguise her exorbitant joy. "Oscar Piper," she said, "I thought I told you specifically that you were not needed."

"I'm so used to getting you out of messes that I can't break the habit." Inspector Piper took her hand and held it a moment longer than was called for. "How are you, Hildy?"

"I'm quite well, thank you. I suppose that you and Captain Kelso have put your heads together and solved our murder by this time."

"Not exactly, Hildy. It's Kelso's baby. He's been good enough to let me butt in a little. Briefed me and all. You picked a lulu this time, old girl. How the devil do you manage it?"

"It's easy. I happen to know a certain Inspector of Homicide who is constantly yelling for help."

"Time!" said Captain Kelso, who clearly felt that the inspector needed it to recover from Miss Withers' haymaker. "What do you say that we continue this amiable chat over a plate at Bardelli's?"

"An excellent suggestion," Miss Withers said.

They left the lobby, Miss Withers like a belle between the two. Soon thereafter, on O'Farrell Street, they had stepped from the sixties backward forty years into the twenties and were being escorted through the jazz age to a table. Captain Kelso had not exaggerated. The minestrone was a dream. The filet of sole was out of this world. Inasmuch as dreams and nightmares should not be mixed, in this world and out of it, murder was not mentioned until coffee had been served.

"This Dwight-Donner-Westering," Captain Kelso said, "was something for the books. I've been in touch with the police back in Illinois. Our Aletha may be some kind of constitutional liar, but all the weird stuff about the Latter Day Vigilantes was straight. There actually was such an outfit, and its founder and leader was a guy who went by the name of Donner. Our late Captain Westering, no less. It apparently flourished for a while. There are just as many kooks on the right as on the left. And just as dangerous. At its peak the organization seems to have had several thousands

of members. It was a secret organization, of course, and no accurate records are available. Because of the arms angle, it got quite a lot of official attention, and it was believed that there were a number of small arsenals hidden away in barns and whatnot in the southern part of the state, but none were ever uncovered. At any rate, quite a treasury was accumulated through donations or dues, often coughed up under pressure, and this treasury seems to have disappeared, by a remarkable coincidence, at the same time that der Fuehrer did a St. Paul and went over to the flower children.”

“You mean,” said Inspector Piper, “that the grand pilgrimage of peace to the land of Ho Chi Minh would have been financed, at least in part, by a gang of little Hitlers? I like that. There’s a rare element of poetic irony in it.”

“Well, it seems likely. I’ve wondered right along where Westering got the cash to invest in an old yacht. Even selling for scrap, yachts come high. But that’s not all. The Vigilantes were supposed to be a rough lot, of course. Bully boys. Storm Trooper stuff. The vigorous life and the ruthless heart. All this was to condition them for the day when they’d take up arms against subversive pinks like Eisenhower and the Kennedys and Earl Warren, taking pot shots with .22’s and B-B guns from behind every hedge and haystack between Cicero and Cairo. One day, while the gang was still active, a bank in a small town in the southern part of the state was robbed by two men. Word got circulated that the robbery was a kind of Vigilante exercise. Supposed to provide an ultimate test of leadership or something. The two men involved, it was whispered, were Westering and this young lieutenant who called himself Bruno Wagner, and who showed up the other night in Sausalito full of threats. Nothing could be pinned on them, however. If they were guilty, they got clean away with it.”

“Do I detect in your voice,” Miss Withers asked, “a note of conviction that the captain was killed by his quondam lieutenant?”

“It seems likely. Could you ask for better motivation? Especially if the captain took a powder with all that bank loot. Better than ten grand, it was.”

“I don’t quarrel with the motivation. I question the method. Poison, it seems to me, is hardly the weapon that would be used by an angry man seeking retribution. Then there is the problem of how he could have gotten it aboard the yacht and into the decanter of sherry.”

“Poison could be the weapon of an angry man if he happened also to be a clever man who wanted to improve his chances of not being caught on

the scene. We've been over that. As for getting the stuff aboard, anyone could have wandered on and off that tubful of nuts, and you know it."

"Possibly. Your theory makes it essential, however, to assume that it was indeed the captain who was supposed to die. Circumstantial evidence, as I keep repeating, points to Lenore Gregory as the logical victim."

"Nuts. Are you still harping on that? How would Bruno Wagner know that the captain kept sherry just for Lenore Gregory? Chances are, he didn't know about the girl at all. The captain took a swig from the wrong bottle, that's all, and your temporary ward can thank God and the angels for an incredible piece of good luck."

"Speaking of luck," Inspector Piper said, "have you had any in trying to run down this fellow?"

"Not yet. He's probably blown town. But we will. Sooner or later we'll turn him up."

"What about the man my young friend Al saw slipping off the yacht the night of the murder?" said Miss Withers. "Any lead on him?"

"Not yet. There may never be. After all, the description was pretty vague, and hippie types are hardly unusual in San Francisco."

"Or," said Inspector Piper mournfully, "anywhere else."

Captain Kelso took a swallow of his excellent coffee and fished out a package of cigarettes, which he offered around without takers.

"I've been occupied with another little project," he said. "I've been checking into the past of Alura O'Higgins. The San Francisco part, I mean. I don't mind telling you that Alura's another one for the books. A real twenty-one carat gal. A lot of her local history is hazy, but the mainstream, so to speak, comes clear. Several years after she arrived in San Francisco, she established a relationship with a local nabob. You two, being foreigners, might not recognize the name, but any native would recognize it soon enough. Old family. Money you couldn't count. All that. There wasn't anything particularly secretive about the relationship. It was well known in many quarters, and even generally accepted. But like most relationships of that kind, it had to end. Everything, so far as I could learn, was amicable. No threats, recriminations, hard feelings. At least not overtly. Soon after the break, Alura opened the Royal Edward, and her career as a restaurateur began. If there was any blackmail involved, it must have been of a very genteel kind. And the restaurant has been successful. Even the local nabob still goes there on occasion to dine. If there was a little genteel blackmail, as

I said, to get it all started, there has almost certainly been no follow-up. No demand for seconds or thirds. Most likely it was a friendly arrangement. A settlement. No regrets. Both parties satisfied.”

“I’ve felt from the beginning,” said Miss Withers, “that Alura O’Higgins was an exceptional woman. Aletha, her sister, is also exceptional, but in a way almost diametrically opposed. She lives in a world of fantasy; she is a liar who believes in lies, and is therefore a seeker of truth in her own way. Alura is a realist; she is a woman of remarkable acumen who is capable, nevertheless, of strong attachments.”

“Hildy, old girl,” Inspector Piper said, a trace of caustic in his voice, “I see that you have not lost your skill as a character analyst. What did you do, read her palm or count the bumps on her head?”

While Miss Withers was snorting and taking a deep breath, Captain Kelso intervened deftly.

“Character analyst?” he said. “That’s just what I’ve been looking for. Between times of doing other things, I’ve been going over my notes on the kooks who were aboard the yacht when, or soon after, Captain Westering died. On the grounds of opportunity, given the method of murder, none of them are excluded as suspects. On the grounds of motive, the captain himself saw to it that nearly all of them *could* have had one, depending on how easily triggered they were. As the head docs say, you have the precipitating factor on the one hand, and the predisposing factor on the other. To put it another way, it takes various degrees of pressure to incite various persons to the same reaction. That leaves us with character. What I need is someone to go over my kooks with me to try to determine which of them would have been capable, or most likely, to commit murder for jealousy or revenge or one of the common motives. Murder for gain, I must say, seems to be out. Miss Withers, you were there. You went through the whole mess with me. Volunteer?”

“Why not?” Miss Withers said. “You have bought my services with a file of sole.”

“An exorbitant price, if you ask me,” Inspector Piper said.

Captain Kelso grinned sourly and hauled out his notebook. He began to flip pages. “All right,” he said. “We’ll skip Aletha and Alura for the present, since we’ve already spent considerable time on them. Otherwise, here they come. First, Lenore Gregory.”

“Absurd,” said Miss Withers promptly.

“I knew you’d say that, of course. I only asked to show that I don’t have any pets. And to show, maybe, that you haven’t sold me a bill of goods quite yet. Now that she’s out of the way, let’s get on with it. The Prophet Onofre.”

“He is either quite mad or an extremely clever charlatan. I’m not sure which. If he is the former, he might kill for many irrational reasons. As the instrument of God, for instance. If he is the latter, I doubt it. Con men and charlatans seldom kill. They are too clever by half. They prefer cutting the small loss to risking the big one.”

“I agree. But in my opinion, the Prophet is not a conscious phony. He’s a flaming lunatic. Well, now comes my favorite. My pick of the lot. Purely wishful thinking, of course. What think you of sweet Nathan Silversmith?”

“Quite capable. Capable of any pose, fraud or atrocity, I should think. Moreover, like most such men, he must be cowardly. I always associate poisoning with cowards, although there are many cases to the contrary.”

“Well done, Miss Withers. The nail on the head. Too bad I haven’t been able to hook him to a convincing motive. But there’s still time. Have a go at Bernadine Toller.”

The calling of the roll had brought it all back vividly to Miss Withers—the fantasy of distortions, the corrosive fatigue, the strange cast of disturbing characters, engaging in antics somehow disoriented. Now, at the sound of her name, the vision of the cocktail waitress from Denver materialized distinctly. The girl who was sort of impetuous. The girl who had a thing going with the captain before Lenore Gregory appeared on the scene. A thing you could feel like goose pimples. She looked at Miss Withers with her empty eyes, and smiled her terrible empty smile, and spoke with her frail and brittle voice in an effect of little-girl demureness that was somehow obscene.

“A frightening girl,” said Miss Withers. “Thoroughly amoral, if I’m any judge. She would, I think, do without remorse whatever she felt compelled to do, and it would take very little to compel her. I wonder, however, if she has even the rudimentary knowledge of botany that would be essential in the use of hemlock as a poison.”

“That’s a crucial point with all of them. Who had a knowledge of poisonous plants in this area? Who had opportunity to acquire the plant and the know-how to extract the poisonous element?”

“Well, that knowledge is not precisely esoteric. Anyone motivated to commit murder with a poison virtually impossible to trace could easily acquire all the information necessary, if he didn’t already have it.”

“Nevertheless, it would take a special kind of person to get the idea in the first place, and to carry it out in the second. You may remember, incidentally, that we actually have a botany student among our suspects.”

“I remember. Carl Cramer. A most unprepossessing young man. He was not only a botany student, but volunteered the information.”

“Why not? He knew we’d find out. If incriminating information is anticipated, it’s only smart to try to make an impression of innocence by volunteering it beforehand. But no motive that I’ve been able to smell out so far. Not even a simple motive like jealousy, which popped up all over the place in that emotional cesspool. Take Adrian Hogue, for example.”

“I’ll be happy to. Together with Corrine Leicester, who was his *very* good friend. Did you interpret that euphemistic expression as I did? I thought so. I also had the conviction that Corrine had recently transferred some of the natural friendliness of her warm heart to Captain Westering, whom she found, as you will recall, to be rare, magnetic and irresistible. This surely excited a certain jealousy in the heart of Adrian Hogue. How deadly that jealousy may have been is a matter for conjecture. At any rate, he did not share Corrine’s exalted opinion of the captain, and didn’t mind saying so. For that matter, neither did any of the other males aboard. It sounded to me almost like a conspiracy. There’s safety in numbers, as the saying goes. But while we’re evaluating Adrian as a possible murderer, we mustn’t neglect Corrine. She betrayed, you’ll recall, a thinly disguised hatred for Lenore Gregory, who she thought had supplanted her in the captain’s capricious favor. Assuming still that Lenore was the real target.”

“Forget it. Our murderer hit his target. Maybe by luck instead of true aim, but nevertheless, he hit it. I’m convinced of that.”

“Why?”

“Because the captain was a natural victim, that’s why. The woods were full of people who had reason to wish him dead.”

“I see that there would be nothing gained in debating the point. Finish the roster.”

“Right. Rebecca Welch.”

“A frightened schoolgirl. A flower child with shattered illusions. She’s had the shock of her young life. When this is over, she’ll head for Ohio as

fast as Papa's bread can take her."

"I concur. Still, I thought she was a little too vehement about verifying Lenore Gregory's coming to find her in the crew's quarters. She could have been lying. You won't like that, so I'll move on. Consider Harriet Owens."

"Let's see. Poet. From Kansas City, as I remember. Diminutive and intense. Feels things desperately. She's moody. Possibly manic-depressive. Up high or down low. Suicide far more likely than homicide. If she ever kills anyone, it will be herself."

"How about her boy friend? At least, I got the notion he was her boy friend. I've put it in my notes."

"It seems probable, inasmuch as they traveled here from Kansas City together. Carey Singer you mean. Professor. Assistant or associate or some-such. You might give him the same motive as Adrian Hogue. On those grounds, I prefer Hogue."

"Excepting sweet Nathan, I'm impartial. The next name I've got is Simon Lefevre. So far as I'm concerned, you can ignore him. I know Simon. I'm not sure if he's living in nitty-gritty or if he's merely got some kind of spiritual tapeworm. Anyhow, I'll lay odds he's never killed anyone, or ever will. It would just be too much trouble."

"Well, omitting Delmar Faulkenstein, about whom I have no clear impressions, one way or the other, that leaves us with Leslie Fitzgerald, about whom I have some very clear impressions, indeed. I paid her a visit in her studio this morning, you know. She is an extraordinarily good artist. Perhaps even a great one. She is devoted to her work, and she works hard at it. But aside from that, and ignoring a blind spot or two, such as her commitment to this absurd peace voyage, she is a remarkably hard-headed and practical young woman. If she decided that it was necessary to eliminate someone as an impediment or a threat, she would not hesitate at murder, at least no longer than she needed to determine how best to do it. But it would be only as a last resort, and only after some very cool and calculated weighing of the odds pro and con. She would murder, I suspect, just as she makes love. Quite deliberately, that is, but with decision and passion once she had committed herself. Precisely as she indulged in her brief affair with Captain Westering."

"Affair? What affair?"

"Oh, yes. She and the captain had an affair. Would you be interested in hearing about it?"

Captain Kelso sputtered, incapable for the moment of coherent speech, and the inspector, wallowing in the delicious experience of seeing a familiar and infuriating tactic pulled on someone besides himself, grinned demoniacally, like an Irish elf. Meanwhile, Miss Withers went on to relate the details of her conversation with Leslie Fitzgerald, to which both captain and inspector were immediately listening with as much interest as she could have wished. When she was finished, Kelso leaned back and stroked his bald pate thoughtfully.

“Are you suggesting,” he said, “that Leslie Fitzgerald slipped Westering a hemlock highball because he was deserting her couch for another? Or, if you prefer, that she tried unsuccessfully to slip it to Lenore Gregory as the assumed trespasser on her preserves?”

“No. No man could mean that much to her. Not Captain Westering or any other. I am suggesting that circumstances of intimacy often bring about the rash revelation of matters better left unrevealed. I am wondering, in brief, if the seed of some other motive for murder was planted in Leslie Fitzgerald’s studio.”

“It will bear looking into.” Captain Kelso leaned forward, lifted his empty coffee cup, and set it down again with a rattle in its saucer. “One of two things is certain. Westering was killed because of the bubbling mess of emotions generated on that packed, stinking tub; or he was killed because of something that happened in his past. As for me, I lean toward the latter view. I want to get my hands on Bruno Wagner, whoever the hell he really is.”

This seemed to be a firmly placed period, and so the trio, fed and still frustrated, paid and departed. Or Captain Kelso, rather, paid. He drove Miss Withers and Inspector Piper directly back to the Canterbury, where he let them out at the entrance.

“You two will want to be alone,” he said with a frightful lewd leer. “See you later.”

He drove away, leaving the two old cronies standing at the curb.

“Congratulations, Hildy old girl,” the inspector said. “It’s pretty plain that you’ve got Kelso as snowed as you used to have me. It must be some kind of witch’s spell.”

Miss Withers sniffed audibly. “He picks my brains, Oscar, just as you did. Let’s go inside and catch up with each other. If you will try to conduct

yourself properly, I'm prepared to invite you up to my room at the risk of my reputation."

"At least," said Inspector Piper with the nostalgic sadness of advanced years, "you are not risking anything else."

17.

AT LUPO'S IN NORTH Beach, the new Aloysius Fister, heated from within by simmering natural juices and a pepperoni pizza the size of a large plate, leaned across the table toward Lenore Gregory. Their hands had somehow crawled across the distance between them to meet, quite by accident, midway. "Lenny," said Al, "do you think you could learn to love a UCLA drop-out?"

"It's not for the pot," said Lenore irrelevantly, not to say evasively, "to call the kettle black."

"Of course, a drop-out can always drop back in."

"That's true, isn't it? Luckily for both of us."

"I don't suppose you would consider marrying me?"

"Do you have enough money left to pay for a license?"

"I could probably borrow it from Miss Withers."

"I doubt it. Miss Withers doesn't strike me as the type who would contribute to the delinquency of minors. She already has a dim view of me, and I suspect that she doesn't see you much clearer."

"Are you a minor?"

"No. Just barely not. But Miss Withers probably judges me on the basis of what she considers my *mental* age."

"Oh, Miss Withers isn't too bad. In fact, she's a pretty shrewd old chick."

"I know. I was only joking. She's been kind and generous."

"Maybe you'd be willing to pay for the license and I could pay you back later."

"Not I."

"Why not? Are you rejecting me?"

"I'm taking you under advisement. Meanwhile, you may be able to save enough to pay for the license yourself. If, that is, I'm still available. Please bear in mind that I'm a prime candidate for Alcatraz or some place."

"Don't be ignorant. Alcatraz was a Federal coop. It's closed now."

"Well, Alcatraz, the gas chamber or wherever, Captain Kelso seems to think I'm a candidate."

“Under all that skin,” said Al darkly, “Captain Kelso’s head is solid bone.”

They sat silently for a moment under the cold shadow of circumstances. The threat evoked by their words was suddenly very real. A shiver passed over Lenore’s body. Al could feel the tremor in her hands.

“I’ll be so glad when it’s all over,” Lenore said.

“What we ought to do,” said Al, “is *do* something.”

“Do what?”

“I don’t know. Anything that would help.”

“Can’t you think of anything?”

“Give me time. I’m trying. I keep remembering the cat I saw slipping off the yacht the night of the murder. Right after Miss Withers went aboard. He must have been there for *something*. And I keep wondering where he went when I followed him upstairs to those pads day before yesterday. It’s funny how he just wasn’t there. He could have gone out the bathroom window and down the fire escape, but somehow I doubt it.”

“Maybe he was there all the time, and you just didn’t see him.”

“Well, one room was empty. At least I was told so. And none of the three men who answered the other doors looked anything like the one I was tailing.”

“Could he have been in a room with one of the others?”

“He could have been, I guess. It’s either that or out the window, because there wasn’t any place to hide. I’ve got a notion to go back and try again. We’re right here in North Beach, anyhow, so it wouldn’t take long.”

“What would you do if you found him?”

“I’d call Captain Kelso or someone to come pick him up. After all, the cops are looking for him.”

“Would you promise not to do anything foolish, like trying to make a silly citizen’s arrest or something like that?”

“Are you kidding? Do I look like the kind of hero who goes around annoying possible murderers?”

“Do you swear that you’ll behave like a sensible coward in all ways?”

“Gladly.”

“In that case, let’s go.”

“Let’s?”

“Certainly, let’s. After all, I’m the one with most at stake. Do you think I intend to let you go off and be cowardly all by yourself? You needn’t

argue with me about it, for it will do you no good whatever.”

Al could see that it wouldn't, so he didn't. Besides, truth to tell, the prospect of separating from Lenore any sooner than absolutely necessary was not a happy one. They left Lupo's and mounted the Hog, and were soon dismounting in a dark street near the building with the four upstairs pads. They went the short remaining distance afoot, holding hands for comfort if nothing else. Al tried the street door opening onto the narrow staircase, and found it unlocked. Together they crept up the stairs, a long and tortuous mile or more, and into the narrow hall lighted only by a dim bulb at the landing.

“Wait a minute,” Al whispered, impelled unconsciously to this show of stealth by the simple knowledge that they were where they probably had no business being.

“What's the matter?” Lenore whispered back.

“Nothing's the matter. Look.” Al gestured down the dark hall, growing darker as it extended farther from the dim light at the landing, and Lenore, clutching his near hand, obeyed.

“Look at what? I don't see anything.”

“Look at the floor under the doors. Do you see any cracks of light from inside the rooms?”

“There's one from the bathroom at the far end. And one from the room just to the right at the rear. It's very dim, and I probably couldn't see it at all if the hall wasn't so dark down there.”

“Right. That means only the one room is occupied.”

“How clever of you to think of that.”

“Oh, well, it's nothing. Just a little trick we private-eyes pick up with experience.”

“On the other hand, it may be a sign that the occupants of the other rooms have merely turned out their lights and gone to bed early.”

“Don't spoil things. I like it better when you're properly admiring.”

“Or it might mean that the occupant of that particular room merely went out and left his light burning behind him.”

“Damn it, are you trying to destroy my self-confidence? Come on.”

They moved down the hall. The boards beneath their feet shrieked with what was surely animated vindictiveness. They stopped before the door. Simultaneously, they were suddenly aware of the utter, unnatural silence of the old building. Al took a deep breath, which whistled softly into

his lungs, and rapped sharply on the door. It moved. With a brief creak of hinges, it swung an inch or two into the room. Al's pent breath was released in a long sigh.

"You were right," he said. "He's not only gone out and left his light burning behind him, but he's left his door unlatched besides."

"Well, that's that," said Lenore. "We may as well leave."

"Wait a minute. I'm being tempted."

"What?"

"It's a character fault. I never come across an unlocked door without feeling an irresistible urge to look behind it."

"Wouldn't that be illegal entry or something?"

"Who's going to enter? I just want to look."

"What would be gained by it?"

"Are you trying to be reasonable with an irresistible urge?"

"Oh, go ahead. Get it over with. Just a quick peek, though. That's all."

Al placed fingertips against the door and pushed gently, slowly revealing the room beyond. He stepped across the threshold and stopped. It was a shabby, impoverished little room, furnished with odds and ends collected from here and there. On the floor a faded rug with the pile worn completely off where traffic had been heaviest. A metal bed with blue paint chipped off in large, ugly patches. A sagging overstuffed chair with dirty brown velour rubbed thin and shiny on arms and seat. Beside the bed, a rickety table painted blue to match the bed, chipped like the bed. On the table, a small bedside lamp from which came the weak light that had seeped under the door. On the floor, on his back in a puddle of blood between bed and door, the body of a stocky man, about thirty years old, with pale blond hair.

Al, standing frozen, recognized the man who had opened the door to him two days ago. After several terrible seconds, he whirled around to face Lenore, seeking to block her view with his body. Too late. She was already staring at the body on the floor. On her face was an expression of almost ludicrous incredulity. Slowly the expression was washed away by a greenish pallor of sickly horror. Her voice was a ragged whisper in her constricted throat.

"Bud!" she whispered. "It's Bud Hoffman!"

At no cost to her pristine reputation, a fact which would have secretly disappointed her if she had seriously thought about it, Miss Withers had just brought Inspector Piper via recapitulation to the dark and foggy dock in the bay when the telephone began to ring. The sound somehow possessed an urgency that shot Miss Withers from her chair in a second and had her speaking into the mouthpiece in two. After speaking, she listened. After listening, she spoke. "Where are you?" she said.

She listened again and spoke again. "Stay where you are," she said. "We'll try to get in touch with Captain Kelso and be there immediately."

She hung up, took a deep breath and turned to Inspector Piper. "Those crazy kids," she said.

Inspector Piper had watched and listened with a growing sense of foreboding and despair. Now he spoke with resignation, secure in the knowledge that what had been bad enough was suddenly worse. "What kids?" he said.

"Lenore and Al Fister. All they started to do was have dinner together, but it seems that they have somehow, in the process, stumbled across a corpse. That was Al on the phone. He was talking from a sidewalk booth in North Beach. Don't just sit there, Oscar. Use the phone and see if Captain Kelso happens to be at headquarters at this hour. If he is, ask him to pick us up here. Meanwhile, I'll put on a hat."

Luckily, having nothing else to lure him home but an empty bed, Captain Kelso was at headquarters. In a remarkably short while, his siren dying to a whimper, he was pulling up in front of the Canterbury, where Miss Withers and Inspector Piper, despite his swift arrival, had been waiting for some minutes. Kelso was in the back seat, behind a driver. Miss Withers piled in beside him, Inspector Piper following, and they were off again with the siren coming to raucous life. Miss Withers passed precise directions to Captain Kelso, who relayed them to his driver, who followed them precisely to the North Beach building where Al and Lenore were waiting as instructed. They were huddled together on the sidewalk at the foot of the dark, narrow stairs leading to the narrow hall and the shabby little room where death had been before them.

No one uttered a word. Captain Kelso was out of the car and pounding up the stairs before the siren's whimper had faded away, Inspector Piper and Miss Withers right behind, Al and Lenore trailing. When Miss Withers

entered the murder room, Captain Kelso was already on one knee beside the body.

Miss Withers was also looking at the dead man's face with a sense of deflation. She had expected a familiar face, one of the amateur Argonauts from the *Karma*, a clear and indisputable connection between the murder there and the one here, and she was totally unprepared for a coincidence. She was about to speak when another voice intruded.

"It's Bud. It's Bud Hoffman."

Miss Withers and Inspector Piper turned in unison. Captain Kelso rose from his knee and turned slowly, with a kind of rigid restraint, just after them. Lenore stood pressed against the wall beside the door, as if to keep as much distance as possible between her and the body, now partially screened by Kelso's upright bulk. Her face was composed, held together by the inner discipline that Miss Withers had noted with satisfaction aboard the *Karma*, and only in her dark eyes could one see the depth of her shock. Al, apparently reading a threat into the concerted attention, suddenly focused on Lenore, edged closer to her along the wall and fumbled protectively for her hand.

"Who the hell," said Captain Kelso with dreadful mildness, "is Bud Hoffman?"

"He was this man I knew back East. In New York. We worked together for CAP. The Committee of Artists for Peace. I told Miss Withers about him." Lenore's voice was quiet, betraying her wonder by only an odd lilting quality. "I wrote to him and told him where I'd gone and what I planned to do, but the letter was returned unopened. Another man at CAP who told me about Captain Westering's voyage in the first place must have guessed where I'd gone, and he probably told Bud Hoffman afterward. That must be the way it was. How else could Bud have followed me?"

"Why would he follow you at all?"

"I don't know. I can't imagine."

"You didn't know he was here? You haven't seen him?"

"Not until Al and I found him here tonight."

"Don't you think it's strange that he'd follow you across a continent and then not contact you?"

"Yes. It's queer. I can't understand it."

"What the devil were you and Al doing in this place, anyhow? What brought you here?"

The question was directed to Lenore, but it was Al who answered it. He picked it up with vague truculence, as if it were a club that he intended to use, if necessary, in defense of true love.

“This is the building I tailed the hippie type to. You remember. The one I saw slipping off the yacht the night Captain Westering was murdered. I saw him again the next day and tailed him here. Only, when I came in after him and tried to find him, he wasn’t here at all.”

Captain Kelso shifted his attention to Al with a slightly pained expression, mildly surprised, as if he were a Great Dane who had been attacked by a Chihuahua. “So far as I can see,” he said, “he still isn’t. Whatever this fellow was, this Bud Hoffman, he wasn’t a hippie type by a long shot.”

Miss Withers, perversely, seemed to have lost all interest in the proceedings at that precise point when they became most revealing. Immediately after Lenore suddenly identified the body on the floor, which lay grotesquely in the puddle of blood that had flowed from a knife wound in his back, she had turned away and begun to prowl the room with apparent aimlessness, poking here and snooping there. No one paid any attention to her except Inspector Piper, who knew her from long experience. He was watching her closely when she opened a narrow closet door and reached up, after a moment, to explore a shelf above her head. When she turned around, her hands were behind her back.

“Lenore,” she said, “you have stated that your letter to Bud Hoffman was returned to you.”

“Yes, I have, and it was.”

“Then it’s obvious that he didn’t learn of your whereabouts from a letter that he never read. Perhaps he was told, as you suggest, by the second man, the one who told you about Captain Westering’s plans in the first place, but somehow I doubt it. I am beginning, in fact, to get an altogether new slant on Mr. Bud Hoffman.”

Inspector Piper grunted and made a short slapping gesture of exasperation. An unofficial kibitzer, he nevertheless butted in. “All right, Hildy! I know you. You’ve got something on your mind as well as in your hands. Let’s have it!”

“I am beginning to suspect,” said Miss Withers, “that Bud Hoffman was able to follow Lenore because he knew where she was going before she ever left. Indeed, I am beginning to suspect that he knew of her plans before

he ever went to New York and deliberately cultivated her acquaintance. He would have had no trouble getting on with the Committee of Artists for Peace, surely. Such committees generally operate on a shoestring. They are happy to get workers as they can, cheap or gratis, with few questions asked.”

“Come off it,” Captain Kelso growled. “How the hell could he have known that Lenore was with the Committee? And even if he’d known, why the hell should he want to join her there?”

“I can only speculate, of course. But it is speculation clearly indicated by what I’m now certain of. Later, no doubt, we shall learn if I am right or not. In the first place, I submit that he learned where Lenore was working, and of her plans to join the voyage, right here in San Francisco. In fact, aboard the *Karma*. Probably from Lenore’s correspondence with Captain Westering. Surreptitiously, of course. As a trespasser and a spy on the *Karma*, unknown to the captain or Aletha or Alura. In the second place, I submit that he went East to New York to *intercept* Lenore. To try to prevent her joining the voyage and giving it the financial support it desperately needed. He must have learned or guessed from her correspondence that Lenore was from a wealthy family, and possibly he had an exaggerated idea of the amount of support she could have contributed. But this scheme developed complications, for he became emotionally involved with Lenore, as we know from what we have been told, and he could take no approach with her that would incriminate himself and ruin his own chances. In brief, he wanted to marry her, a development, if he could have brought it off, which would have offered the double satisfaction of a profitable alliance for himself and revenge on the captain.”

“Revenge!” Captain Kelso, almost frantic in his frustration and impatience, was on the brink of a jig. “Why the hell would he want revenge?”

Miss Withers slowly brought her hands from behind her back and held them out in front. In her right hand, dangling by an earpiece, was a pair of dark glasses. In her left, a limp object somehow obscene, was a cheap, shaggy wig.

“Unless I am greatly mistaken,” she said, “you will find that Al’s hippie and Bud Hoffman and Bruno Wagner are one and the same person.”

18.

MISS WITHERS FLOATED IN strange and shadowed lassitude in that dreamy half-life between waking and sleeping. She was aware of her body and where it was, but she had no conviction that it would respond to her will. She knew where it had been and how it had gotten to its present place and condition, and she had a notion that it was now late in a day following a long, bad night, but she seemed to be perversely indifferent to all that had been or might be, and to any faint proddings of her mind that she ought to be up and doing something about something. She remembered the North Beach murder, she remembered the hours afterward through which Captain Kelso lumbered in a kind of controlled and icy rage, and she remembered being delivered to her hotel and her bed at a pale hour when rational citizens were beginning to stir and rise. She could now hear, in the other twin, the deep and cadenced breathing of Lenore, who had long ago tumbled, with all the enviable resistance of the young to adversity, into a deep sleep of exhaustion.

Independent of her body's lassitude, Miss Withers' brain teemed with antic thoughts. They tumbled over one another in a feverish rush to be recognized. A little discipline was indicated, Miss Withers decided. She began deliberately, without disturbing her delicious sensation of basic indifference, to introduce order into her thinking, and to line up her thoughts in some kind of sequence. Well, then ...

Bruno Wagner was Bud Hoffman. Aletha Westering, called into service, had verified that. Reconstruction of the recent past, based on that double identity, was not difficult to imagine in its essentials. After the ignominious collapse of the nefarious Latter Day Vigilantes, Wagner-Hoffman must have been driven by a consuming desire to track down his traitorous leader. In time, no doubt after many false scents and dead ends, he had indeed finally caught up with Martin Dormer, now Captain Westering, currently master of a conglomerate crew of dubious Argonauts, leader of a pilgrimage to lands of Zen and Ho Chi Minh.

In the beginning, when he first arrived at the end of his long trail, Wagner-Hoffman had clearly let Westering remain ignorant of his presence. He had made no threats, taken no action, and had, indeed, apparently been

at pains to remain obscure. Obviously, as some of Miss Withers' more unsavory contacts would have put it, he was casing the job, whatever the job would turn out to be. In his stealthy invasions of the *Karma*, reading correspondence and gathering bits of information from whatever informant, he had surely come to the conclusion that Westering's tainted funds had been dissipated in his current venture, and that the voyage was, indeed, in critical financial straits.

It was then that he had devised the scheme of striking at Westering through Lenore Gregory, or at least of discovering for himself if such a strike could be made. He had headed east. He had attached himself to the Committee of Artists for Peace, and had cultivated Lenore. But what had started out to be a cold-blooded scheme of revenge had backfired. Lenore, in the beginning a means to an end, had become in the end an end herself. But no matter. His bad luck. She was not quite the gullible romantic he had assumed, and had proved impervious to his charms. It must have been a cruel blow, added as it was to his other injuries, for he was surely, like all who cast themselves in roles like his, a man of monstrous vanity. When she disappeared without word or warning, he knew at once where she had gone. Soon afterward he had followed. This time, indirection abandoned, for a head-on confrontation with his apostate Fuehrer.

Why? To seek restitution? If not restitution, retribution? Had Wagner-Hoffman, wearing his shaggy wig and dark glasses, slipped aboard the *Karma* and spiked Captain Westering's liquor supply with hemlock? It was certainly possible. Anyone, with a minimum of caution, could have come and gone almost at will on that undisciplined vessel. And it was probable that the quondam lieutenant of vigilantes, apparently a young man of varied experience in a checkered past, was familiar with seagoing vessels, and may even have become acquainted with the *Karma*'s scheme of hatches leading from the hold to the captain's stateroom and to the deck. Moreover, it was not to be discounted that he had a contact aboard, someone who passed information and gave assistance. But vastly more important psychologically, would an embittered man seeking revenge on a traitor resort to poison instead of a more direct and satisfying method?

Which brought her to the girl now sleeping deeply, if not peacefully, a few feet from her. Had Wagner-Hoffman indeed intended to poison her along with the captain? If he had a motive of revenge for the murder of the captain, it was at least possible to postulate a similar motive for the murder

of the girl who had, in his own mind, shamed and deserted him. It was true that the motive did not seem as compelling to the rational mind, but the minds of murderers, Miss Withers had learned, were not always rational. In brief, had Wagner-Hoffman been an economy-minded murderer? Had he tried for two birds with one stone? It did not demand too active an imagination to conceive of the rage and the hatred that must have consumed him when he found the man who had betrayed him and the girl who had deserted him in circumstances with apparent connotations. Finding insult added to injury, so to speak, had he meant, as Miss Withers had previously speculated, to kill them both?

If that was true, why had he hung around afterward at his deadly peril? And why had he himself been murdered?

At this point, having compromised her position so far, Miss Withers made the grand concession, for purposes of further speculation, of abandoning it altogether. She approached the murder of Captain Westering without prejudice from a new point of view. Her mind, suspended in shadows between waking and sleeping, seemed to work with a precision and depth of insight that was almost unnatural, as if it borrowed energy from her dormant body. *Let us suppose*, she thought, *that Captain Kelso has been right all along—that Westering alone was the intended victim of murder, and that it was by the sheerest chance that Lenore was not killed by mistake.* In the light of this supposition, she began to review again the circumstances of the murder—the character of the victim, the possible motives, and most of all, one by one, the incredible cast of characters involved in parts major and minor.

Someone passed in the hall outside the door.

Outside the windows, rising from the street and faintly heard in the room, were the multiple sounds of the city moving.

And in her bed, Miss Withers was suddenly sitting erect in a blinding flash of light.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed and planted her feet on the floor. The room was full of shadows, drapes drawn across the daylight outside the windows, but all objects seemed to have, nevertheless, a kind of etched distinction. She saw and thought with incisive clarity. She saw by the traveling clock on her bedside table that it was half after four. In the bed across the way, Lenore, sleeping, made a soft whimpering sound like a troubled child. In Miss Withers' mind there was no doubt. She could no

more have doubted the validity of her insight than a saint could have denied the validity of revelation. The only question remaining, now that she knew, was what to do about it. She sat still as a stone on the side of her bed for a long while, thinking. Then she reached for the phone beside her clock.

She gave directions to the switchboard operator and waited.

“Captain Kelso, please,” she said. “Miss Hildegard Withers calling.”

She waited again until the captain, who was available, came on.

“Hello, Miss Withers. You dug up another body?”

“Fortunately, no. Would you care to arrest the murderer of the two bodies we already have on hand?”

“Oh, sure, sure. Just name a name.”

Miss Withers named a name.

Miss Withers climbed the long staircase to the emerald lawn and the walk of colored flags. Behind her, a reluctant collaborator, was Captain Kelso. Behind Captain Kelso, a dubious kibitzer, was Inspector Oscar Piper. The lights of Sausalito glittered on the hills. In the distance, beyond the shimmering span of the Golden Gate Bridge, the lights of San Francisco flared upward into the dark sky. Miss Withers, with a feeling of triumph, prodded the button that rang the chimes.

Her triumph had not been easy. Far from it. In the beginning Captain Kelso had balked like a mule, digging in his heels. Inspector Piper, without actually saying so directly, had managed to imply that his old gadfly had finally forsaken all discretion and was brewing an eruption that would rival the earthquake of 1906. But Miss Withers had remained confident and adamant. And, it must be confessed, not completely candid.

“Aletha Westering,” she had said firmly, “is clearly indicated. The evidence against her is circumstantial but it is extremely convincing. She had motive. She had opportunity. When sufficient pressure is put on her at headquarters, she’ll surely confess. You’ll see. She’s fundamentally an unstable woman, shored by fantasy, and her breaking point will be low.”

Captain Kelso’s response had been predictable. “Damn it, the only motive she had that I can see is jealousy or hate or whatever a woman feels when her husband chases other women. And you’ve said right along, by God, that Aletha wasn’t the type for it. Not in a million years, you said.”

“As to that, I can only claim a woman’s prerogative to change her mind.”

“All right, *all right!*” Captain Kelso had snarled and scrubbed his bald dome. “But I’ll tell you one thing. You’d better be dead right, or you’ll be dead, period!”

And so on these harsh terms they had proceeded, and here they were, and Miss Withers, dissembling the nagging doubt she secretly suffered, prodded the button again and rang the chimes. The door was opened by a maid. Miss O’Higgins, the maid said, was not at home. Miss Withers explained that they had come to see Mrs. Westering. In that case, if they would step in, the maid would see if Mrs. Westering was in. She left them standing and went away. She returned to say that Mrs. Westering would be with them immediately. Meanwhile, they could come down from the elevated, open foyer and find seats in the living room. They came down, but they didn’t find seats. They stood in a grim cluster and waited until Aletha Westering appeared.

When she came, she was wearing again the flowing white robe, a golden goddess of the dawn in incandescent light, and Miss Withers could hear the breath whistle softly through the nostrils of Inspector Piper, who was, so to speak, just receiving his initiation. As for Miss Withers, a veteran of the club, she wondered with a touch of cynicism if Aletha Westering wore the robe to bed. It would make, after all, a very suitable nightgown.

“Captain Kelso.” Aletha inclined her golden head to the captain, including Miss Withers and Inspector Piper in the greeting with a sweep of her golden eyes. “I didn’t expect you. Come in, please, and sit down.”

“Thank you, no.” Captain Kelso, feeling uncomfortably uncertain, was exceptionally brusque. “I’m afraid that I must ask you to come along with me.”

“May I ask why?”

“Aletha Westering, I am arresting you for the murder of your husband. You need say nothing, of course, until you have consulted an attorney.”

19.

FORTY-EIGHT HOURS LATER, almost to the dot, Miss Withers crawled out of the sidecar of the Hog. The simple action, completed with as much dignity as was possible, filled her with a vague sadness, an abortive nostalgia. She had actually grown irrationally attached to the treacherous vehicle, and more than a little fond of the freckled young man who jockeyed it. Now that the time had almost come when she would have no further need of either, she was beginning already to miss both it and him.

“Al,” she said, “stay at hand. I don’t anticipate that I shall be long.”

Turning away, she entered the Royal Edward. The velvet rope did not now block the way into the dining room, where patrons sat at snowy tables set with gleaming silver and cat-footed waiters moved soundlessly across a maroon carpet. In the bar, soft canned music was an accompaniment to soft live conversation. Behind the bar, a pair of bartenders in dark red mess jackets moved efficiently to serve a row of drinkers on stools and a pair of waitresses, dressed in dark red uniforms, who brought orders from other drinkers at booths and tables. Behind and above the bar, nude in oils, Alura O’Higgins surveyed the scene. At the end of the bar, sidewise on the stool that was her observation point, sat Alura for real. She was wearing a long dark red gown. Red was obviously Alura’s color. Miss Withers approached her.

“Good evening, Miss Withers,” Alura said. “Thank you for coming.”

Miss Withers inclined her head, saying nothing. Alura sat quietly, an untouched martini on the bar beside her, watching the room and smiling faintly.

“You see that you find me,” she said, “where you found me before. I like to sit here and watch over things. It gives me pride and pleasure.”

“As well it should,” said Miss Withers.

“Yes. But I musn’t delay you. I suppose you are wondering why I called and asked you to see me here.”

“I have speculated. I have no official position. Why not Captain Kelso?”

“You’ll understand soon enough. Anyhow, other considerations aside, I simply prefer you. Perhaps it’s because your taste in painting is sound. But

never mind. If you will come with me, we will find a more private place to talk.”

She led the way along the bar and around the far end and through a gold door into a red and gold room. With the door closed behind them, the sounds of the bar diminished, receding, it seemed, to a remote world. Across the room was a polished mahogany desk. Alura O’Higgins moved to the desk and sat down in a chair behind it. She nodded toward another chair in front of the desk and a little aside, a high-backed chair with padded seat covered in red plush, and Miss Withers occupied it obediently, her back erect and her feet planted firmly together.

“I understand,” Alura said, “that Aletha has confessed to the murder of her husband.”

“That is so,” Miss Withers said.

“You must know that the confession is utterly false.”

“What I know, or suspect, is of no consequence. The police accept it, and that’s all that counts. Why not? It has the ring of truth.”

“I think you know better, Miss Withers. You are, I believe, an unusually perceptive person. Aletha is a child. An abnormal child, if you wish, but still a child. She believes sincerely that she talks with the dead. She believed that her husband, one of the most flagrant and conscienceless frauds who ever lived, was a man of exalted character and inestimable worth, misunderstood and hounded by his inferiors. Dead, he is a martyr, and now she is convinced, by the action of the police, that it is her destiny to share his martyrdom. She is, in brief, incredibly susceptible to the power of suggestion. She *believes*. Is it any wonder that her confession has the ring of truth? It would deceive a lie detector. *But it does not deceive you.*”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Because, otherwise, you would not be here. Because you knew before you came what it is I have to say.”

“That it was you who murdered Captain Westering?”

For a long while Alura O’Higgins did not speak or reply. She sat looking beyond Miss Withers, her dark head canted in an attitude of listening, and when she did speak at last, it was not to answer but to ask a question of her own.

“Why do you think I did?”

“In the beginning I didn’t. I was diverted from the truth by a mistaken belief that was suggested by circumstances. As soon as I had finally

corrected that error, I saw at once that you were the most probable suspect.”

“What error?”

“The conviction that the poison had been intended for Lenore Gregory.”

“No, no. If the girl had died because of me, I should have been sorry. The decanter was there. I assumed that it was the captain’s. The use of hemlock was quite a good idea, I thought, because it couldn’t be traced. I know something about poisonous plants. A little research gave me all else that I needed to know. But you haven’t answered my question. What convinced you that I poisoned the captain?”

“You had the strongest motive, once the true circumstances were clear. To be precise you had two motives. You never intended to help finance this insane voyage, of course. You are far too hard-headed and practical for that. A woman who can parlay the profit from an early affair into a prosperous restaurant like this is simply not the type. However, for your own purpose, you pretended to be interested. Your purpose, actually, was to give yourself a chance to kill Captain Westering in your own time and your own way. You knew him for what he was, and knew that the only way you could rid your sister of him was to rid the world of him. Perhaps you hesitated to take the risk at first. Perhaps that’s why you delayed. But then something else happened. Leslie Fitzgerald fell under the influence, shall we say, of the insidious captain. She also was touched by the corruption. You admire Leslie Fitzgerald very much, do you not?”

“She is a great artist. It was bad enough to know that she degraded herself with such a man, but it was infinitely worse to think that she might destroy herself by going off on an incredible voyage from which she would almost certainly never return. Her place was here, in her studio, with her work. I didn’t really believe that the *Karma* would ever sail, but Captain Westering, in his way, was an ingenious man. He might have found a way.”

“Well, there were your two motives. Aletha Westering and Leslie Fitzgerald. And then there was another factor besides the corruption of Leslie, as you regarded it, that drove you at last to precipitate action. I refer to the man who called himself, among other things, Bruno Wagner. He showed up at your home some time before the murder of the captain, full of accusations and threats. You were present. You heard him. And it was to you a dreadful revelation. For the first time you got a full look into the

depths of the captain's character. His depravity, if you please. You knew, after that, that you had to act. From that time the captain was a dead man."

Alura O'Higgins smiled. She looked down at her hands, which were holding each other on the desk before her, and smiled. In the smile there was no amusement.

"You are a very clever woman, Miss Withers. I have thought so from the moment I first saw you. There is a communication between some women in such matters. Bruno Wagner, unfortunately, created a problem. The trouble was, I didn't know that he was hanging around the *Karma* disguised as a hippie. As I learned later, he had known the Gregory girl back East, and remained to spy on her, as he did on the captain. He slipped aboard whenever he chose, and must have become quite familiar with the vessel. Someone aboard, I'm sure, knew about him and acted as his informant. From what he said to me later, I believe it was the man named Silversmith. But that's aside. The point is, when I put the hemlock poison in the decanter, the afternoon of the day before the captain drank it, Bruno Wagner had come up into the cabin through the hatch from the hold before I entered. He was hiding in the head while I was there and saw everything I did. When the captain died the next night, he was on the vessel again. As a matter of fact, he had come to see the captain, I suppose to threaten him again about the old business of the Vigilantes, and found him dying. It did not take much intelligence, of course, to connect my actions and the captain's death. Too bad for Bruno Wagner. He thought that he could blackmail me, and he's dead."

"And you killed him."

"Yes. I went to that shabby little room of his in North Beach, prepared to kill him if the opportunity arose. As luck had it, he wasn't in his room, but the door was unlocked. I went in and waited in the dark and stabbed him when he returned before he could cross the room and turn on the light beside his bed. I turned it on myself, to make certain he was dead, and left. It was really quite simple."

"Not so simple if you have to pay for it."

"Well, that's something else. I have a notion that it will not, after all, be so hard. You realize, of course, that we are quite alone here. If I choose, I can deny every word I've said to you."

"You can, but you won't."

"How can you be sure?"

“If you planned to deny all this later, you would not have called me here to listen to it now. And if you denied it, you would be permitting what you want to prevent. Your sister would stand trial. In view of her confession, she would surely be convicted. The wives of philandering husbands who get murdered are invariably, as the saying goes, sitting ducks.”

“Would you permit that, knowing that she is innocent?”

“Would *you*?”

“No. Nor can I accept the prospect for myself. That is why, among lesser reasons, I asked you here to listen. As you said, you have no official position. You cannot arrest me and take me away with you.”

“I might make a citizen’s arrest.”

Alura O’Higgins stood up. Opening the belly drawer of the desk, she removed a long envelope and held it in front of her in both hands. Tall and strong, just under six feet, she stood like a proud goddess of twilight, a denizen of lingering dusk, and a trace of amusement, this time, was in her smile.

“You might try.” She held out the envelope across the desk. “It’s all in here. You may deliver it to Captain Kelso. Take it, please, and go.”

Miss Withers, rising, took it and went.

20.

“HANKY-PANKY!” SAID CAPTAIN Kelso. “Pure hanky-panky!”

“Conceded,” said Miss Withers.

“Not only hanky-panky,” said Captain Kelso, “but very *dangerous* hanky-panky!”

“Nothing ventured,” said Miss Withers, “nothing gained.”

Captain Kelso looked apoplectic. His face and bald head shone like a stoplight. Miss Withers looked smug. Her expression betrayed some slight concern for the captain’s heart and digestion.

“Look,” said Captain Kelso with mighty and heroic calm, “I’ll admit it *worked*. Even if it did end in suicide. I won’t even accuse you of finagling it that way, although I have my suspicions. But I still say there was no way you could have *known* it would work.”

“It was possible, all things considered, to make a calculated guess.”

“All right. *All right*. Call it a guess. Call it insight. Call it woman’s intuition. By God, you can call it revelation if you want to. Do I care? Not I. Not by a jugful. I’m just a plain cop. I’ve got no special gifts. I just plod along looking for fingerprints and cigarette butts. But do me one favor. Just one more. Tell me again what these things were that you considered. Go over them slowly. After all, if anyone ever asks me, I’ve got to be able to tell them how I figured this case.”

They were, the three of them, Miss Withers and the captain and Inspector Piper, bellied up to a table, with red-and-white-checked bibs tied around their necks. On the table were rosy lobsters and fragrant pots of drawn butter, of which they were making, despite the captain’s threatened indigestion, a zestful mess. Miss Withers speared a generous bite of succulent tail, dunked it in her pot, and lifted it dripping to her mouth. Minding her manners, she chewed and swallowed before she spoke.

“Gladly,” she said. “First, however, I must grant that you were right on a crucial point. The intended victim *was* Captain Westering.”

“Thanks. That helps. It makes me feel useful.”

“Yes. Well, when I reluctantly accepted that at last, the solution was quite clear. It leaped, so to speak, to the mind’s eye. Alura O’Higgins, of course. She suffered no delusions, as the other women did, concerning the

character of Captain Westering. She saw him clearly for what he was—a monstrous fraud capable of infinite corruption. And she stood to lose, from his current fantastic venture, the two people she cherished most in this world. Aletha, her sister, whom she loved and pitied, and Leslie Fitzgerald, her protégée, whom she loved and admired. Even if these two had gone on the pilgrimage they contemplated, and had by some miracle returned safely from it, the captain would still have been there, like a lingering infection in their lives, and to Alura O’Higgins there was only one cure. In many ways she was a remarkable woman. She was tough, direct, ruthless when necessary. The captain had to be eliminated. The use of hemlock, the instrument of execution among the ancient Greeks, was probably incidental, selected for the reasons we have already noted, but it suggests, nevertheless, a kind of poetic justice. Captain Westering was indeed executed as an almost impersonal judgment. Just as Hoffman-Wagner was disposed of when he was rash enough to try to blackmail her.

“But there was one great danger from the beginning, and Alura O’Higgins recognized it. The danger, in brief, that Aletha Westering would be accused of the murder. She appraised the danger and took the risk, knowing that she would never let her sister pay the penalty if it came down to it. In my evaluation of the character of Alura, I was certain that this was so, for there was nothing false in her devotion to those she took to herself. And so, inasmuch as there was no tangible evidence on which to arrest Alura herself, I argued you into arresting Aletha as a way of getting Alura indirectly.”

“Not argued,” said Captain Kelso succinctly. “Conned.”

“Very well. If you prefer. For a brief while I began to doubt. It looked as if, after all, Alura might be willing to let Aletha pay the penalty for her. But she was, as we now know, only biding her time. Waiting to be sure we weren’t running a bluff. Aletha’s confession settled it. The only course left then was the grim one of telling the truth, and, after that, of taking her own way out. I must say that I find a certain solace in the way she chose. You called it the grand gesture, did you not? It was somehow appropriate for Alura. It seems prophetic, looking back—that entertaining little lecture you delivered to me on the statistics of suicide by leaping from your beautiful bridge across the Golden Gate.”

“There!” Captain Kelso pounced as if he had been waiting in a crouch for the right time. “That phony confession of Aletha’s! That was actually

what broke things open. And that was something you *couldn't* have counted on. By God, you *couldn't*!”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Miss Withers was offensively smug. “I was convinced, at any rate, that she was highly susceptible to suggestion. Alura herself, if you recall, implied as much. But I shan’t press the point. Let us accept the confession of Aletha as a welcome bonus.”

“Sure,” said Captain Kelso. “I won’t look a gift horse in the mouth.”

When he said this, he was staring across the table into the general area of Miss Withers’ physiognomy that included the specific feature mentioned. Inspector Oscar Piper suddenly choked on a chunk of lobster tail and began to cough violently and rudely into his napkin.

Miss Withers stared at him coldly. “Oscar,” she said, “must you be such a glutton? Try to eat more slowly and chew more thoroughly.”

The inspector, red in the face and gasping for breath, reached for his wineglass and held it aloft. “Here’s to Hildy,” he wheezed. “God’s gift horse to all dumb cops.”

It was by way of being a farewell dinner. Al and Lenore, on the principle that two’s company and five’s a mob, had gone elsewhere by themselves. Tomorrow morning early the inspector and the latter would be on a jet headed east. Miss Withers and the former would be on a Hog headed south. Captain Kelso, stuck, would remain. He was already lonely. To the bleak and closed compartments of his leathery heart, where others had been and were gone forever, including himself as he used to be before he became what he was, there would now be added another, aching and empty, where a certain exasperating spinster had briefly dwelt. He reached for his glass.

“I’ll drink to that,” he said.

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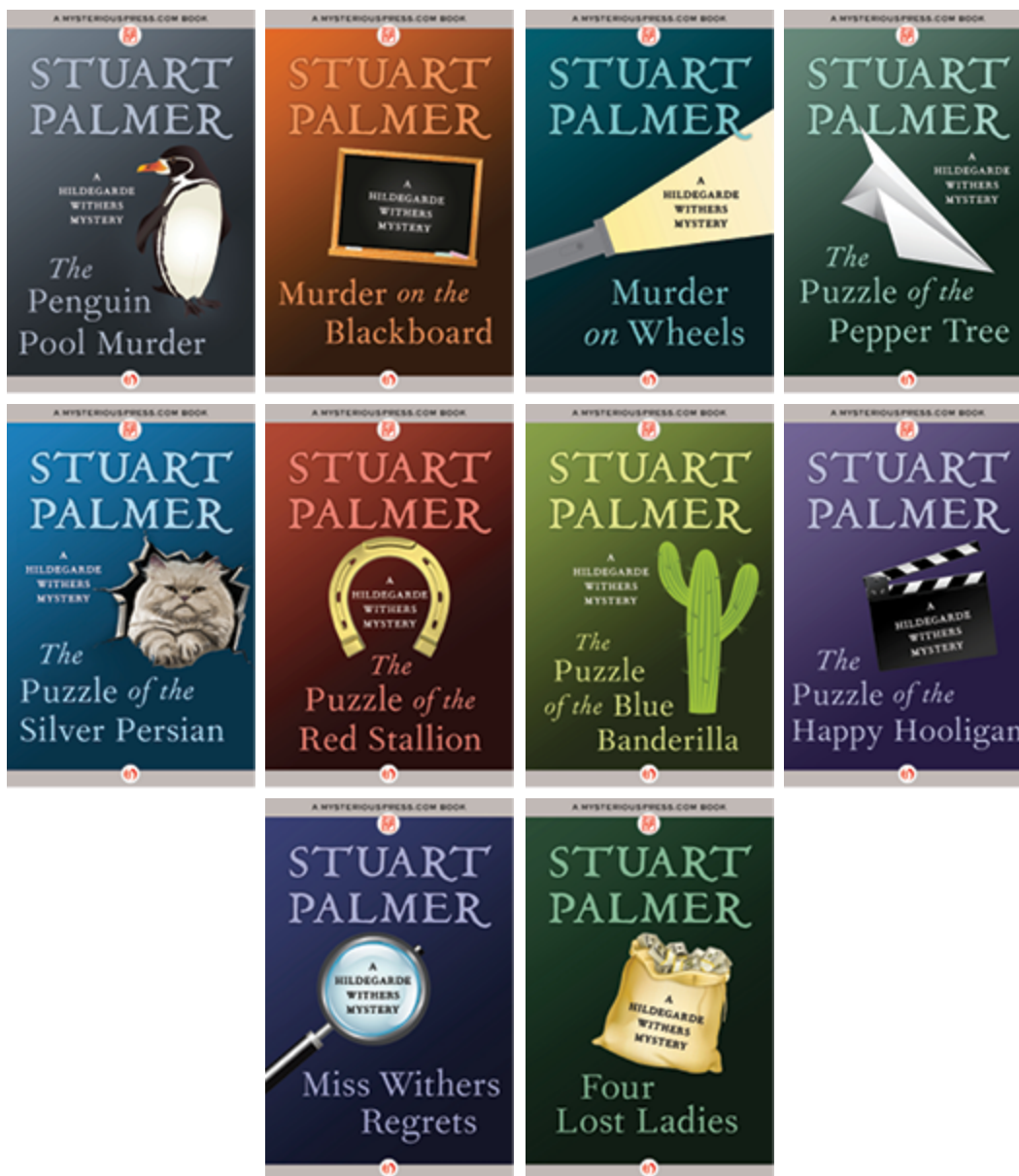
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